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“An endeavour at something spiritual”: Queer Spirituality
in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

Hannah Murdock

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“An endeavour at something spiritual”: Queer Spirituality in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

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On November 7, 1928, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary that her 1931 novel, *The Waves*, would be an “abstract mystical eyeless book” (*Diaries* 3; 203). In her personal writings, she also referred to the novel as “an endeavour at something mystic, spiritual; the thing that exists when we aren’t there” (114). From the initial inspiration for the novel to her own notes, Woolf envisioned *The Waves* to be “spiritual” above all else. This project examines Woolf’s engagement with spirituality throughout *The Waves*, particularly in the moments in the novel in which the queer characters—Rhoda and Neville—express sexual desire. In doing so, I suggest that Woolf engages in a queer spirituality—a spirituality that conveys both a queer sexual desire and identity. For Rhoda and Neville, and in some ways Woolf herself, that desire remains unachieved, suggesting that Woolf viewed spirituality as a means of expressing a queer identity that was oftentimes frustrated and unfulfilled. In that frustration, however, Woolf also appears hopeful for a future, a potentiality, in which queer individuals could express their queerness openly.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, queer, spirituality, religion

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Introduction

On September 30, 1926 Virginia Woolf had what she would later describe in her diary as a “vision” (*Diaries 3*; 154). In her well-known diary entry, Woolf sees a nebulous *something* and comes to the realization that in solitude, “it is not oneself but something in the universe that one’s left with. It is this that is frightening & exciting in the midst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is. One sees a fin passing far out” (113). This image, what Woolf later refers to as “my vision of a fin rising on a wide blank sea,” would become the inspiration for her 1931 novel, *The Waves* (154). Over two years later, on November 7, 1928, Woolf wrote that *The Waves* would be an “abstract mystical eyeless book” (203). In her personal writings, she also referred to the novel as “an endeavour at something mystic, spiritual; the thing that exists when we aren’t there” (114). From the initial inspiration for the novel to her own notes, Woolf envisioned *The Waves* to be “spiritual” above all else.

The Waves follows the lives of six individuals—Bernard, Jinny, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, and Susan—from childhood to adulthood as they cope with the death of their friend, Percival. Using a stream-of-consciousness narrative, Woolf gives insights into the inner thoughts and feelings of each character, including what could be considered their spiritual experiences. In her own life, Woolf was, in many ways, anti-religious; she was both a self-proclaimed atheist and an integral member of the Bloomsbury Group, a cohort whose general anti-establishmentarianism was often highly critical of traditional Christianity (de Gay 3). Despite her frequent critiques of religion, though, Woolf was deeply invested in the spiritual.¹ To this end, this project will examine Woolf’s engagement with spirituality throughout *The Waves*, particularly in the moments in the novel in which the queer characters—Rhoda and Neville—express sexual desire. I will show that these moments of queer desire are spiritual, though not necessarily religious. I

suggest that Woolf engages in a queer spirituality—a spirituality that conveys both a queer sexual desire and identity as I will explain later. For Rhoda and Neville, and in some ways Woolf herself, that desire remains unachieved, suggesting that Woolf viewed spirituality as a means of expressing a queer identity that was oftentimes frustrated and unfulfilled. In that frustration, however, Woolf also appears hopeful for a future, a potentiality, in which queer individuals could express their queerness openly.

Recent scholarship demonstrates an increased interest in the role of religion and spirituality in the works of Virginia Woolf. Though she distanced herself from religion in her life, some critics, including Jane de Gay, Kristina K. Groover, and Matthew Wickman, refer to Woolf's work as "spiritual" (de Gay 162, Groover 3, Wickman 96). The term "spiritual" is frequently used in connection with the term "religious," but, as Wickman points out, "spirituality is not necessarily a religious category" (97). A broader definition is needed, for, as Wickman states, "spirituality seems almost as difficult to define as it is to measure" (327). Groover argues that the spiritual elements of Woolf's works are reflected "not in her espousal of religious ideas, but in her persistent investigation of those otherwise inexplicable experiences from which religious ideas emerge" (3). According to Groover, Woolf's works are spiritual in that they address what would be considered "religious" questions, such as the meaning of life (2–3). Groover also uses terms such as "religious, spiritual, sacred, mysterious, or numinous more or less interchangeably" (6). Citing religion scholar Ann Taves, Groover suggests that these words would all be considered "first-order experiential terms. . . . They are defined by the person having an experience she deems as 'special' or 'set apart,' rather than by an outside authority who categorizes an experience as religious or spiritual based on pre-defined (second-order) terms" (6). Thus, Groover's notion of the "spiritual" is not necessarily associated with traditional

religion but is dependent on an individual's experience of something "deemed religious" or "special" (6–7). Spirituality, then, is a broad term that is distinct from religiosity, suggesting that experiences that do not reference religious figures or traditions can still be deeply spiritual.

Examining the emerging academic field of spirituality is useful in broadening this definition even further. "Spirituality," according to Philip Sheldrake, "concerns what is holistic—that is, a fully integrated approach to life" (5). Furthermore, spirituality "embodies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will enable people to achieve their fullest, even transcendent, potential" (5). Similarly, Sandra M. Schneiders, defines spirituality as "the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence" (16). Spiritual experiences then involve a feeling of transcending the self or the individual to achieve a sense of ultimacy, or "fullness of life" as Charles Taylor refers to it. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that spirituality involves a sense of "fullness," with "fullness" referring to "the condition we aspire to" or a "fuller condition, often described as salvation" (780, 7). He writes, "Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition. . . . But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there" (5). This "sense of fullness" may come in an "experience which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities and points of reference" (5). In this way, "fullness" can be understood as another "place," somewhere or something to be achieved or reached in certain spiritual moments or experiences (7). Taylor also notes that for some (those he calls believers) "the place of fullness requires reference to God," while for others, whom he refers to as unbelievers, "fullness" can be understood in terms of a "potentiality of human beings understood naturalistically" (8). Whether in reference to God or not, belief

involves a sort of longing for a potentiality that is not yet here. Furthermore, Taylor notes that fullness is something that is received or given to them “but the receiver isn’t simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self” (8). It is in these moments of transcendence that individuals feel as if they have reached another place, a different “condition” or “potentiality” outside of their ordinary experience (5, 7).

Wesley J. Wildman expands this definition by suggesting that spirituality can be understood in terms of “ultimacy” and “intensity” (105). Ultimacy experiences are any experiences that are “existentially significant” and address or engage in “ultimate concerns,” such as the purpose of life, the existence of an afterlife, and more (268). Wildman further argues that intense experiences have “cognitive and emotional potency that focuses attention; and rich interconnection of ideas, memories, and emotions that weave normally separated parts of life into a single field of meaning,” all of which “catalyze existential and spiritual potency and qualify intense experiences as a species of ultimacy experiences” (105). So, spirituality *may* refer to religiosity, but for these critics, it also encompasses “special” or “intense” experiences that transcend the individual, connecting that individual to something (or things) outside of themselves, to something more holistic.

Using this expanded definition is useful when applied to Woolf scholarship because it acknowledges Woolf’s complicated, often antagonistic view of religion in her life while also recognizing her significant engagement with spirituality. Though her grandparents on her father’s side were prominent members of the evangelical Clapham sect, Woolf’s parents were agnostic (Lewis 149). As mentioned earlier, Woolf considered herself an atheist. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf writes that “certainly and emphatically there is no God” (*Moments of Being* 72). Furthermore, in a 1927 letter to her sister, Vanessa Bell, after learning that T.S. Eliot had

converted to Anglo-Catholicism, Woolf writes, “There’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God” (*Letters III* 457–58). Despite this strained relationship with religion, Woolf describes her “moments of being” as particularly spiritual; these moments are intense, special, and often transformative.

Though some critics have read Woolf’s “moments of being” as spiritual,² there is little research on how these spiritual moments are experienced by queer characters in Woolf’s novels. There has been, however, an increased critical interest in the intersection of spirituality and queerness in modernist studies more broadly. For example, Brenda Helt’s and Madelyn Detloff’s *Queer Bloomsbury* (2016), specifically Todd Avery’s chapter on Lytton Strachey’s enactment of a sadomasochistic, homoerotic crucifixion, demonstrates that there is a larger modernist tradition of engaging with religious language in order to portray queer desire.³ What is missing in modernist scholarship working at the intersections of spirituality and sexuality is research into how Woolf specifically appropriates spiritual—rather than religious—undertones in order to write queer narratives. There has certainly been ample scholarship on Virginia Woolf’s own queerness and how that queerness manifests in her literary works⁴ as well as Woolf’s use of religion and spirituality.⁵ There is minimal scholarship, however, that merge the two. Matthew Mutter hints at the intersection of the two in *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance*, wherein he examines Woolf’s relationship with religion and spirituality outside of mainstream Christianity. Mutter explains how “the sublime” can be both a religious and an aesthetic designation and that “in Woolf . . . it may also be erotic,” citing the “religious feeling” brought on by Sally Seton’s kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Mutter 70). Margaret Sullivan’s “‘She heard the first words’: Lesbian Subjectivity and Prophetic Discourse in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*,” explores more explicitly the connection between

religion/spirituality and queer readings of Woolf's texts. Sullivan argues that Rhoda in *The Waves* engages in "prophetic discourse" and religious narrative from a lesbian perspective in order to "reconfigure God's creative words" (184). She focuses specifically on Christianity in *The Waves* and ultimately argues that Rhoda's lesbian appropriation of Christian language "fails to overthrow [Christianity's] power" because of her eventual death and disappearance from the text (185). Both Mutter and Sullivan, however, focus on the religious elements of these queer moments. By using the broad definition of spirituality, it becomes clear that many homoerotic moments in Woolf's texts that might not be considered religious can be understood as spiritual. Woolf, rather than attempting and failing to overthrow Christianity's power through queer appropriations of religion, as Sullivan argues, creates a queer spirituality—one that engages with spirituality to envision what could be considered a queer "condition," to borrow a phrase from Charles Taylor.

The concept of a "queer spirituality" has been used by scholars to describe a spirituality that is uniquely experienced by queer individuals. Yvonne Aburrow, for example, writes that "queer and LGBT spiritualities" are "distinguishable as separate discourses from the 'mainstream' of their traditions, incorporating unique theology, theory, practice, art, poetry and ritual . . . which stems from the experience of being LGBT and/or queer" (154).

Though Aburrow, like many scholars who use the term, does not give a strict or exact definition of "queer spirituality," she suggests that there are a "number of features of queer and LGBT spiritualities that arise from their position as discourses of the marginalised," including "resistance to normativity, . . . the initiatory experience of coming out; the radical celebration of difference" and more (153). Claudio Bardella similarly suggests that queer individuals have "a separate spiritual identity" that stems from "deep experiences of pain and alienation internalized

during the process of growing up as the ‘other’” (127). Though the term “queer spirituality” may be as difficult to define as spirituality itself, it has been used to describe spiritualities that are uniquely experienced by queer individuals, usually stemming from experiences of “otherness.”

In reading *The Waves* through the lens of queer spirituality, I draw on Aburrow and Bardella’s descriptions of queer spirituality as a spirituality that is unique to queer individuals and their experiences. The spiritual experiences of the queer characters in the text—Neville and Rhoda—are essentially different from those of their heterosexual counterparts in that they express queer sexual desire. Furthermore, these spiritual experiences are uniquely queer in that Neville and Rhoda are unable to fully achieve their desire due to outside limitations. Queer spirituality, then, refers both to spiritual moments that express non-heterosexual desire and to spiritual moments that are fluid in their nontraditional approach to conceptions of spirituality. For example, queer spirituality as Woolf portrays it speaks to the “otherness” experienced by queer individuals because of their identities; Neville and Rhoda are limited in their ability to express these identities but in their most spiritual moments, “break through [their] ordinary sense of being in the world” by envisioning being able to act on their queer sexual desires (Taylor 5). This expands our definition of what is “spiritual” to include a longing for a queer “condition,” or a state in which queer individuals can express their queer identity and fulfill their sexual desires without repercussion. This condition, a type of “outness,” was in many ways inaccessible for Woolf during her time and for her characters, but the longing for a time and place where that condition could be achieved is an inherently spiritual feeling (Taylor 8). By reframing moments in the novel that have been traditionally understood as moments of sexual desire as a form of queer spirituality, I argue that Woolf demonstrates two trajectories for the queer condition through two different characters, Rhoda and Neville. Though neither Rhoda or Neville fully

achieve this queer spiritual condition, Woolf describes two distinct possibilities: one which recognizes the limitations placed on queer individuals in the early twentieth century and one that looks forward toward the possibility of a life without those limitations.

Rhoda

Rhoda's character arc is one of the most tragic out of the six main characters of *The Waves*. As a child, she views herself as an outsider, a sentiment that continues into her adulthood. We learn little of her adult life, and it is only through Bernard that we learn that Rhoda commits suicide. Rhoda presumably had no romantic relationships, but scholars have traditionally read her as a lesbian. Though the character of Rhoda more explicitly expressed her lesbianism in early drafts of the novel⁶Rhoda's sometime subtle queerness takes on overtly spiritual tones throughout the novel. When the three girls—Rhoda, Jinny, and Susan—are in school, Rhoda romanticizes her teacher, Miss Lambert. She describes the “purple light” of Miss Lambert's ring as an “amorous light” and continues,

When Miss Lambert passes . . . everything becomes luminous. . . . Wherever she goes, things are changed under her eyes; and yet when she has passed is not the thing the same again? . . . She lets her tasseled silken cloak slip down, and only her purple ring still glows, her vinous, her amethystine ring. . . . When Miss Lambert passes, she makes the daisy change; and everything runs like streaks of fire when she carves the beef. Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. I dream; I dream. (45)

Here, Rhoda describes Miss Lambert in almost supernatural terms: Miss Lambert changes everything around her—everything “under her eye” seems to experience some element of transformation (45). Even her most mundane actions have a mystical resonance: as Miss Lambert

carves the beef, the world around her “runs like streaks of fire” (45). In this way, Rhoda seems to attribute god-like powers to Miss Lambert, indicating that Rhoda not only romanticizes Miss Lambert but also deifies her. In doing so, the moment becomes a distinctly spiritual one in which Rhoda essentially worships Miss Lambert. Rather than referencing God, Rhoda replaces the object of her worship in a moment of queer deification. Rhoda is inspired by Miss Lambert’s transformative effect on the objects around her, but it is a characteristic that only Rhoda attributes to her. Neither Jinny nor Susan find anything remarkable about their teacher; it is only Rhoda that has such a spiritual reaction to Miss Lambert. This suggests that Rhoda’s spiritual response stems from her sexual attraction.

Rhoda’s own body changes under the eyes of Miss Lambert, demonstrating that Rhoda has a distinctly physical reaction, or even attraction, to Miss Lambert.⁷ Rhoda’s attraction to Miss Lambert is not merely physical but is also spiritual—Rhoda notices that things lose their “hardness,” even her own spine seems to melt away, and she begins to dream. It is as if Rhoda herself needs to be changed, to be transformed in order to interact with Miss Lambert. As Taylor argues, “the receiver of a spiritual feeling isn’t simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self” (8). Rhoda’s attraction to Miss Lambert causes her to become transformed and to transcend her body. Alice van Buren Kelley notes that Rhoda is “totally visionary” as she finds herself dreaming and struggling to maintain a connection to the real world (161). When Rhoda lies in bed at night, she has to keep her feet on the footboard to ground her in reality, emphasizing the transcendent element of her dreams. Kelley, like Wildman, argues, “in true vision, the self is merged with others” (Kelley 159–60). The “other” in this case is Miss Lambert as Rhoda, through her attraction, feels herself in a

strange, metaphysical way, merged with her. Kelley reads this moment as a vision, while also noting the distinctly physical, even sexual, attributes of that vision.

The vision here is decidedly transformative; in these visions, Woolf describes a feeling of transformation—a change, physical or intangible, in which a queer individual might feel themselves to be something else. As Sheldrake argues, the “need for transformation” is a “central concern of spirituality” (63). Though closely related to transcendence, transformation in terms of spirituality has a few key distinctions. While transcendence involves experiencing, even in small glimpses, “fullness” or “fulfillment,” transformation is what must occur to some degree in an individual in order to achieve that experience. Essentially, in order to transcend the human world to the spiritual world, one must themselves transform to something more spiritual. For example, the moment in which Rhoda describes Miss Lambert involves a type of transformation; not only does Rhoda feel as if her own body is transforming as noted earlier, Rhoda’s transformation is also metaphysical as she seems to be “opened up,” as Taylor would put it, to light and dreams. Miss Lambert seems to spark in Rhoda both a physical and a spiritual transformation, one in which she begins to transcend the physical world to a more spiritual world.

Neville

Like Rhoda, Neville views himself as somewhat of an outsider: as a child he is frail and unable to play with the other children. He is also interested in studying the classics and grows to become a successful poet. One of his most notable characteristics, however, is his overt homosexuality. Neville, similar to Rhoda, experiences what could be considered spiritual experiences throughout the novel that are directly connected to his queer sexual desires. In the second section of the book, the three boys—Neville, Louis, and Bernard—are in boarding school. While in school, Neville experiences what he describes as a “vision” in which he

worships Percival (52). In doing so, he invokes a queer spirituality in which his desire for Percival becomes a form of worship. Earlier in the same section, the three boys sit in the chapel as their headmaster, Dr. Crane, reads a lesson from the Bible. Neville notes, “The brute menaces my liberty. . . . The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them. I gibe and mock at this sad religion” (35). Neville views Christianity as corrupt, sad, and even limiting. In fact, it is the crucifix attached to Dr. Crane’s waistcoat that excites Neville’s “ridicule” upon meeting him (32). Rather than focusing on the lesson, he chooses to observe Percival as he “flicks his hand to the back of his neck” (36). “For such gestures,” Neville remarks, “one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime” (36). Neville chooses to focus on Percival instead of listening to the religious lecture and, by doing so, romanticizes him.

Neville—who prefers reading “Shakespeare or Catullus” while Percival, in Neville’s eyes, thinks of nothing but cricket—seems to be “hopelessly in love” with Percival, despite their differences and despite Percival’s disinterest in Neville. As Neville is contemplating to whom he should expose his “absurd and violent passion” for Percival, he remembers a moment from the day before:

Yesterday, passing the opened door leading into the private garden, I saw Fenwick with his mallet raised. . . . Then suddenly descended upon me the obscure, the mystic sense of adoration, of completeness that triumphed over chaos. Nobody saw my poised and intent figure as I stood at the open door. Nobody guessed the need I had to offer my being to one god; and perish, and disappear. His mallet descended; the vision broke. (51–52)

Neville’s description here uses distinctly spiritual language—“mystic,” “god,” and “vision” in particular—to suggest that even Neville himself considers his vision to be quasi-religious or at least spiritual, despite his earlier critique of Christianity. Perhaps Neville recognizes this

experience as spiritual, shutting the vision down in order to avoid acknowledging the spiritual resonance of the moment. The moment is also an “ultimate” one; Neville experiences a sense of “completeness” and feels a need to “disappear,” underscoring this sense of ultimacy (Wildman 105, Woolf 52). This moment is particularly notable because, if we interpret Neville’s “one god” to be Percival, Woolf appears to correlate spirituality with Neville’s homoerotic “passion” for Percival. Neville’s vision occurs only after thinking about his “absurd and violent passion” for Percival and is followed by him longing for “privacy, and the limbs of one person” (51–52). It is reasonable, then, to assume that Neville’s vision—his “mystic sense of adoration”—is directed at Percival; the “one god” to whom Neville needs to offer his being is, in fact, not a god but an apotheosized Percival.

Neville further deifies Percival by characterizing him as a Christ-like figure. Neville points out that Percival despises him for being too weak, “yet,” Neville thinks, “he is always kind to my weakness” (48). He continues, “He despises me for not caring if they win or lose except that he cares. He takes my devotion; he accepts my tremulous, no doubt abject offering” (48). This language is reminiscent of the Paul’s well-known epistle on his own weakness, in which he asks Christ to take away his weakness to which Christ responds, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (*Authorized King James Version*, 2 Corinthians 12.9). Furthermore, Neville’s “offering” of his “devotion” to Percival is reminiscent of Christ’s request for offerings and devotion from his followers, a theme present throughout the Bible. Through this religious language, Neville deifies Percival, essentially worshiping him by “offering” his being to him (48, 52). Furthermore, as Neville initially thinks of images of Christ in the chapel rather than listening to Dr. Crane’s lecture, he compares them to Percival’s body. When thinking about his dislike for religion, Neville associates this “sad

religion” with images of “tremulous, grief-stricken figures advancing, cadaverous and wounded, down a white road shadowed by fig trees where boys sprawl in the dust—naked boys” (35). For Neville, the image of Christ appears to be a sexual one. He is also reminded of the “stricken figure of Christ in a glass case” that he saw on a trip to Rome (35). Neville, by comparing the physical bodies of Christ and Percival, deifies Percival while also drawing on images of “naked boys” in order to underscore the homoeroticism of his vision.

Other characters in the novel besides Neville also characterize Percival as a Christ-like figure, however Neville’s deification of Percival differs in that it is overtly homoerotic while the others’ are not. Louis describes himself and his classmates as Percival’s “faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle” (37). Not only does this line anticipate Percival’s death, but Percival having “faithful servants” recalls Jesus’ phrasing in the parable of the talents as told by Matthew (Matthew 25.23). Furthermore, the use of sheep as a metaphor for followers of Christ is pervasive in the Bible (Psalm 23. 1–3; John 10.27; Matthew 18.12), further emphasizing Percival’s characterization as a Christ-like character. Additionally, the dinner with Percival before his death has been read by many scholars as an allegory for the Last Supper (Richter 127; Ronchetti 104; Utell 15). Bernard refers to the dinner as a “communion” (126). As Percival leaves the dinner, Bernard imagines him in India, riding a “flea-bitten mare,” and wearing a “sun-helmet” (136). Bernard continues, “He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were—what indeed he is—a God” (136). Here we see most blatantly, Percival’s likeness to Christ, particularly in his final days, riding a donkey and communing with his apostles in the Last Supper.⁸ Neville’s deification of Percival, however, differs from Louis’ and Bernard’s in the sense that it is a homoerotic apotheosis based on his sexual desire.⁹ Furthermore, Neville’s desire for Percival—to “offer [his] being,” to

“perish, and disappear” is a distinctly spiritual concern because it deals with feelings of “ultimacy” or “ultimate concerns” (Wildman 268).

Neville also expresses his queer spirituality in a transcendent, yet embodied form. In fact, many of the spiritual moments in *The Waves*, despite their alignment with transcendence, are embodied rather than disembodied experiences. Neville, for example, experiences another homoerotic vision after Percival’s death. Upon receiving the telegram that informs him of Percival’s death, Neville thinks, “I will stand for one moment beneath the immitigable tree, alone with the man whose throat is cut, while downstairs the cook shoves in and out the dampers. . . . People keep on passing. Yet you shall not destroy me. For this moment, this one moment, we are together. I press you to me. Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob” (152). The “immitigable tree” and the “man whose throat is cut” refer back to a moment when Neville, standing on the stairs as a child, heard about a dead man who was found in a gutter (152). When he hears about the man’s throat being cut, Neville notes that the “apple tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared; I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. . . . There were the floating pale-grey clouds; and the immitigable tree” (24). The image of this tree from his childhood returns to him when he hears of Percival’s death, and Neville seems to be transported back to that time. This moment captures both a feeling of interconnection—“we are together”—and a moment of homoeroticism: Neville presses Percival to him, asking him to “feed on me” and “bury your fangs in my flesh,” a distinctly physical, even erotic, description of an embrace (152). This experience is distinctly physical. The moment also uses spirituality to convey not religious devotion as expected from a vision but implicit sexual desire. The vision is also unique in that it is not abstract, but is embodied; Neville is able to feel Percival’s body. Here, Woolf uses a distinctly embodied spiritual moment to suggest that moments of

queer desire experienced physically or sexually are not any less spiritual; rather sexual desire can be deeply spiritual when that embodied desire relates to feelings of transcendence and a longing for a queer condition.

Neville also experiences what could be considered a spiritual transformation in his queer relationship. Though many of Neville's spiritual moments in the novel involve a homoerotic desire for Percival, his most spiritual moment in the novel involves a queer relationship with his unnamed lover. Woolf dedicates a long passage to Neville in which he speaks to whom scholars have read as his lover. Reminiscent of Rhoda's description of Miss Lambert, Neville says, "When you come everything changes. The cups and saucers changed when you came in this morning" (178). Just as the "daisy" changes under Miss Lambert's eyes, Neville's lover has the ability to seemingly change physical objects. This similarity further demonstrates that Rhoda's apotheosis of Miss Lambert is queer because it is compared to the romantic relationship between Neville and his lover. It also highlights that, in another moment of queer apotheosis, Neville further deifies his lover, endowing him with an almost supernatural power. I suggest, however, that there is nothing unique about Neville's lover or Miss Lambert—they are not gods and none of the other characters mention their ability to change the world around them. Rather, Rhoda and Neville experience this sense of transformation as a response to their queer sexual desire.

The relationship is both transformative and transcendent, allowing Neville to engage in a queer spirituality with his partner. Describing his relationship with an unnamed, male partner, Neville explains, "This room seems to me central. [. . .] Here we can be silent, or speak without raising our voices. Did you notice that and then that? we say. He said that, meaning. . . . She hesitated, and I believe suspected" (179). In his room and with his lover, Neville is free to speak. But he also speaks of his fear of being caught, of being "suspected," suggesting that the relationship is a

hidden one, as many queer relationships needed to be at the time (179). Not only is the relationship queer, it also enables Neville's spirituality. In talking and spending time freely with his unnamed lover, Neville details what can be understood as a form of self-transcendence:

Thus we spin round us infinitely fine filaments and construct a system. Plato and Shakespeare are included, also quite obscure people, people of no importance whatsoever. I hate men who wear crucifixes on the left side of their waistcoats. I hate ceremonies and lamentations and the sad figure of Christ trembling beside another trembling and sad figure. (179)

Here, Neville feels connected to a larger "system" outside of himself and even outside of his own relationship. The use of the term "filaments" references back to Jinny's observation during the Last Supper scene that the six characters' membranes seem to have left their individual bodies and have "spread themselves and float around us like filaments" in a giant web, further emphasizing the self-transcendent element of the moment (135). Once again, Neville has a transcendent, out-of-body experience in which he feels connected to people outside of his own experience, to a larger system or to that which is "holistic" (Wildman 105). By being in a queer relationship, Neville suggests, the two men "construct a system" made up of people, including Plato and Shakespeare, and even people of "no importance whatsoever" (179).

Perhaps Woolf is drawing on Plato and Shakespeare as queer figures, or at least figures who have been associated with queerness, in order to suggest that this system is a queer system made up of people like Neville and his lover. In this system, individuals are no longer individuals but transcend their own bodies to become part of a larger system, even a larger identity. Feeling connected to other queer people outside of one's own relationship, to a community, is often considered an element of a queer identity.¹⁰ This feeling of queer community and identity can be

read as what Taylor refers to as the “the condition we aspire to” or “fullness” (780). Based on Taylor’s definitions, Neville achieves this feeling of “fullness” by being “brought out of self,” or transcending the self. In this way, Neville, at least for a moment, achieves fullness by reaching a condition or place in which rather than feeling close to God, he feels closer to his own queerness, his ability to live a life in which he can enact that queerness with someone else. This is, in essence, an expression of a queer spirituality in that Neville is able to express a spiritual feeling—one of transcendence—not to God but to a sense of “fullness,” to another place or world in which he can not only act on his queer desire but is also part of a larger, queer system.

Neville is quick to separate his spiritual experience from religion; after experiencing what can be considered a type of transcendence, Neville immediately emphasizes his hatred of “men who wear crucifixes on the left side of their waistcoats,” a reference to Dr. Crane who would teach the boys from the Bible when they were at school, indicating that Neville’s hatred for religion he experiences as a child in school is still very much present as an adult (179). Neville characteristically stresses that he hates religious ceremonies and iconography (“the sad figure of Christ” [179]), but the moment in and of itself, though not religious, is a spiritual one—there is no reference to God, only reference to a system larger than himself. Perhaps this is why Neville, seemingly for no reason, once again describes his hatred of religion—he recognizes the moment as spiritual and feels the need to distinguish between his spiritual feelings and more formalized religion.

This could also be an acknowledgment that the fullness he achieves in the moment described above is limited. As Taylor writes, fullness is often “something we just catch glimpses of from afar off” (5). Neville for a moment feels himself to be in that condition, that potentiality in which he can act on his sexuality, but that experience is exactly as Taylor describes, an

“experience which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of the world” (5). Neville’s feeling of connection with a larger queer system is not a regular feeling for him or even a feeling that is possible for him to experience consistently. He notes that it is only in his private room that he is free from the outside world (179). This moment of queer spirituality is one in which Neville can, even for a moment, experience fullness—a condition in which he can feel himself in another place or potentiality where he can live as a queer person and identify as such outside of his room and for more than a singular moment. The moment ends with Neville addressing his lover once again: “Let us abolish the ticking of time’s clock with one blow. Come closer” (181). As they draw physically closer in a moment of queer love, they also transcend physical limitations, condensing, even moving beyond, time. This suggests that even though this moment of transcendence is limited, Neville continues to experience moments of transcendence in which he can access that “glimpse” of the queer condition. For Neville—and Rhoda—their queer spiritual experiences are glimpses into that “fullness,” or moments in which Woolf’s characters feel, even for a brief moment, that they have reached the “condition [they] aspire to” (170). Since these glimpses are moments in which Neville and Rhoda express their queer sexualities, we can understand that fullness as one wherein they can enact their desires and live out their queer identities without fear.

Two Queer Conditions

Still, while Neville and Rhoda may *access* that fullness in certain moments within Woolf’s novel, neither character is able to fully *achieve* it. In fact, several of what I have deemed “spiritual moments” in the novel are shut down before they are ever fully achieved. And this is precisely the heart of Woolf’s argument. Woolf uses queer spiritual moments to hint at the potentiality for fullness while also acknowledging the limitations experienced by queer

individuals at the time. For example, Neville's vision in the first section of the novel abruptly ends after he acknowledges his need "to offer [his] being to one god." Neville notes, "His mallet descended; the vision broke" (51–52). Other spiritual moments end artificially due to the structure of the novel; by switching, sometimes abruptly, between narrators, these visionary moments end with a formal break in the narrative. Neville's vision of Percival after his death, for example, ends with Neville's "I sob, I sob" and jumps immediately to Bernard's reflection on Percival's death (152–53). Similarly, Rhoda's own visionary dream of Miss Lambert also ends with a narrative switch, in this case to Jinny's account of a schoolyard game (45). In this way, many of the characters' visions are cut short due to the formal construction of the novel.¹¹ The queer condition, one in which Neville or Rhoda can fulfill their desires, is never fully achieved.

Nevertheless, Woolf demonstrates two trajectories for the queer condition. The first is a lack of fulfillment, represented by Rhoda; the possibility of fullness is left unsatisfied by her suicide. Rhoda never "consummates" her sexuality or has a romantic relationship in the novel. Margaret Sullivan argues, "Rhoda's woman-centered desire is written only subtly" (167). This is not so much a limitation of the form of the novel but more a limitation of the time in which Woolf was writing. As Annette Oxindine argues, "Rhoda's suicide [is] . . . a sign of the lesbian's effacement within a social and linguistic system that denies her an articulation of self" (204). Rhoda, like many other implicitly queer, particularly lesbian, characters in novels of the time, are never able to consummate their sexuality, sometimes even dying before acting on their sexuality. Catharine R. Stimpson refers to this phenomenon as the "dying fall," which she defines as a "narrative of damnation, of the lesbian's suffering as a lonely outcast" (364). This phenomenon—in which queer characters die prior to or immediately after consummating their sexuality in some way—has also been referred to more recently as "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" or

“Bury Your Gays” (Hulan 17). Of course, not having sex does not make an individual or a character any less queer; however, Rhoda’s premature death, like that of other queer subjects of Woolf’s contemporaries—contributes to her inability to be overtly and openly queer. Despite Rhoda’s spiritual expressions of desire, these expressions are left unfulfilled.

It is through Neville that Woolf suggests a second trajectory, gesturing toward a future possibility of fullness. With his unnamed lover, Neville partially, and in a limited way, achieves the condition he aspires to, as he is able to have a queer relationship, a relationship that enables a sense of queer identity that transcends his individual experience. However, Neville is unable to be publicly and openly queer; he notes that it is only in his room that he and his lover can be free: “Here we can be silent, or speak without raising our voices” (179). Even the fact that his lover is unnamed highlights the limitations placed both on the queer characters and on Woolf herself to write these queer characters “subtly” as Sullivan puts it (167). Despite the need for delicacy and the limitations placed on Neville’s ability to be outwardly queer, he is still in an overtly queer relationship and is capable of acting on his sexual desires. The contrast between Rhoda’s and Neville’s experiences reflects Woolf’s awareness of both the limitations and opportunities for queer individuals in the early twentieth century. Rhoda’s death is a recognition of Woolf’s contemporary moment in which queer individuals could not, in most cases, be openly and publicly queer without censure. Virginia Woolf’s own suicide has been compared to Rhoda’s and could be viewed as her own expression of sexual unfulfillment.¹² Neville’s life, on the other hand, gestures toward a future possibility of openness and Woolf’s own desire to create a space for openly queer characters.

Though Woolf does not fully articulate what a future for queer characters could look like, she gestures toward a more hopeful future through Neville who, despite limitations, is able to be

openly—to some degree—queer and have a queer relationship. By reading these queer moments as spiritual, we can understand Woolf as putting forth a queer spirituality that envisions an open future for queer individuals. Furthermore, by formulating a queer spirituality that is separate from religion and even traditional spirituality, Woolf suggests an inclusiveness, expanding spirituality to include moments of queer desire that would traditionally be condemned by Christianity in Woolf's lifetime. This inclusivity and fluidity in defining spiritual moments allows us to understand queerness as more than a critique of heteronormativity or more than that which is anti-hegemonic. Queerness can also encompass fluidity in one's own spirituality, allowing for an engagement with religion without necessarily believing in that religion or subscribing to strict definitions of what is "spiritual." Queer spiritual moments also allow for moments of spirituality to be defined as such without reference to religion or deities.

Furthermore, our understanding and definition of queerness can benefit from the intangible, abstract qualities of spirituality as Woolf portrays them. Rather than using "queer" only in the context of negativity¹³—queer as being that which is *not* straight, *not* cisgender, *not* patriarchal, or *not* hegemonic—we can think of queerness in more spiritual terms—that which is indefinable, untouchable, and, to use Sheldrake and Wildman's definitions, "holistic" and "ultimate." By viewing queerness through the lens of spirituality, we can view "queer" as a positive,¹⁴ fluid designation that includes the possibility of unique and transcendent spiritual moments.

Regardless of whether or not Woolf's queer characters achieve the fullness or condition they aspire to, they engage in spirituality simply by hoping to reach it. Since spirituality is a process of "becoming"—Sandra Schneiders refers to it as an "ongoing project, not merely a collection of experiences or episodes" (16)—the queer characters, regardless of whether or not they consummate their sexuality, engage in queer spirituality by participating in this project of

trying to become who they want to become. Queer spirituality is not just moments of queer desire, fulfilled or unfulfilled, that use spiritual language; instead, it is imagining ways of being/becoming “queer.” It is in that oftentimes messy struggle of longing and sometimes failing to achieve “fullness” that Woolf gestures toward a positive and fluid, if not spiritual, queer condition.

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Notes

¹ For more on Woolf's interest in religion, see Jane de Gay's *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture* (2018) in which she examines Woolf's lifetime interest and engagement with Christianity. De Gay argues that, "Woolf's debates with Christianity form a more powerful undercurrent in her work than has been acknowledged" (2).

² See Groover's introduction to *Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf*. Furthermore, Pericles Lewis refers to "moments of being" as Woolf's "term for a modern form of sublime experience" (143).

³ In "Nailed: Lytton Strachey's Jesus Camp," Todd Avery argues that Strachey's enactment of a sadomasochistic, homoerotic crucifixion was an appropriation of religious imagery in order to advance a queer perspective of that religion—what Strachey called a "new religion . . . that . . . admits of so much that is varied, and ridiculous, and strange" (Unpublished 73). Similarly, in *H.D. and Modernist Religious Imagination*, Elizabeth Anderson suggests that the religious influences on H.D.'s works, particularly *The Gift*, convey a "fluid sexuality," drawing a connection "between sexuality and the sacred" (47).

⁴ Though Woolf herself did not identify as queer, or as lesbian for that matter, her sexuality has long been of interest to scholars. See, for example Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer's *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*. As Cramer argues, Woolf is a part of a "particular lesbian tradition" because she used her writing to "adopt the homoerotic self as a center from which to oppose patriarchal values to reimagine self and community (Cramer 177). Furthermore, Barrett points out that Woolf "lived in a milieu that included many lesbians and gay men, and she had

many passionate relationships with a number of women,” including, most notably, Vita Sackville-West, and Woolf’s diaries and letters include “overtly lesbian material” (4–6).

⁵ See for example Emily Griesinger’s “Religious Belief in a Secular Age: Literary Modernism and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*,” Pericles Lewis’ *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, and Gabrielle McIntire’s “Notes toward Thinking the Sacred in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”. By analyzing the “preponderance” of “religious—or at least spiritual” syntax—phrases, idioms, motifs, and more—McIntire suggests that Woolf “explor[es] the sacred,” an exploration that she argues, “tears apart Woolf’s supposed atheism with suggestive (almost aggressive) persistence” (McIntire 1–2). Lewis argues that Woolf describes a “secular sacred” or a “form of transcendence or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world without reference to the supernatural (Lewis 21). Similarly, in her analysis of religious themes in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Emily Griesinger argues that the “secular” and the “sacred” “collide” in moments where “characters seek transcendent or ultimate meaning in this world without reference to an external deity” (Griesinger 440).

⁶ See Annette Oxendine’s “Rhoda Submerged: Lesbian Suicide in *The Waves*.”

⁷ Patricia Cramer argues that the language used to describe “Rhoda’s sexual fantasies,” particularly for Miss Lambert, is similar to Woolf’s description of her “love for Vita.” In her private writings, Woolf “speaks of Vita’s power to transform any scene she enters” just as Rhoda feels of Miss Lambert (“Jane Harrison and Lesbian Plots” 451).

⁸ Many scholars read Percival as an allegory for Christ, though others resist this reading. Jane De Gay, for example, tells us that “Percival is not a Christ-like figure: his death in a clumsy

accident, when his horse trips over a molehill, is more reminiscent of his bumbling Arthurian namesake, and his death is final, leaving a void that the friends never manage to fill” (de Gay 2006).

⁹ Woolf is not the only Modernist writer to draw a connection between Christ-figures and queer desire. See Jarica Watts’ “Of Dashes, Gashes, and Wounds: Radclyffe Hall and the Spiritual Mysticism of ‘Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself’ and Ed Madden’s “*The Well of Loneliness*, or The Gospel According to Radclyffe Hall.”

¹⁰ See Neal Carne’s “Is there queer community?” in *Queer Community: Identities, Intimacies, and Ideology*.

¹¹ See Jacques Rancière’s “Auerbach and the Contradictions of Realism.”

¹² See, Annette Oxindine’s “Rhoda Submerged: Lesbian Suicide in *The Waves*.”

¹³ See my earlier definition of queer spirituality in which I suggest that queer spirituality is queer in its nontraditional approach to spirituality and organized religion. This is only one portion of a larger, more fluid definition of spirituality that I have hoped to demonstrate as being more interested in feelings of queer desire than in being subversive, though the two are certainly not mutually exclusive; rather I use queer spirituality as an inclusive term that is not limited to one definition of “queer.”

¹⁴ Claudio Bardella notes that “many individuals who engage in homosexual behaviour . . . favour the term ‘queer’ for positive self-identification” (119). Bardella also recognizes the “polysemous ambiguity of the label ‘queer’” (119).