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Woolf and the Great War

That is one of the aspects of death which is left out when people talk of the message sorrow: they never mention its unbecoming side: its legacy of bitterness, bad temper, ill adjustment.

(Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”)

The elegiac dimension of Woolf’s writing was already identified in the first book-length study of her work, when Winifred Holtby called *To the Lighthouse* a “ghost story” aimed at burying the phantom of the dead mother.¹ But numerous critics did not take up the challenge of reading Woolf’s work as a narrative form of mourning until the posthumous publication of her diary, letters, and memoirs, which began in the 1970s. Based on these autobiographical writings, early evaluations reflected a remarkably uniform view; they defined Woolf’s life and writing as an unfortunate case of pathological grief.² Just as biographers attributed Woolf’s recurring mental breakdowns and suicide to her failure to mourn the loss of her mother, half-sister, and brother, literary critics argued that Woolf’s experience of unresolved grief marred her fictional achievements. Mark Spilka, in the only monograph to date focused exclusively on mourning in Woolf’s work, suggested that her “lifelong inability to love...seems to have been peculiarly intertwined with her lifelong inability to grieve”; he argued her novels reveal “an emotional vacancy beneath their surface brilliance.”³ Even Elaine Showalter, one of the most widely recognized feminist literary critics, claimed to have found the “real” Woolf not in her fiction but in the story of
her disordered bereavement. In Showalter’s estimation, Woolf’s concern with “a female tradition” proved to be “stifling to her development” and “a betrayal of her literary genius,” because “by the end of her life she had gone back full circle, back to the melancholy, guilt-ridden, suicidal women... whom she had studied and pitied.”

This project of reading Woolf’s fiction as a case history of neurotic grief has now come to an end. Through a process of critical reevaluation that began in the 1980s, biographers and literary critics have convincingly demonstrated that Woolf’s challenge to conventional mourning constitutes a positive achievement. Woolf does defy the orthodox assumption, still reigning in some circles today, that healthy mourning comes to a decisive end when the bereaved have detached emotional bonds from the lost object and accepted some form of consolation for the loss. But far from the pathology it was once taken to be, this defiance allows Woolf to redefine mourning as an ongoing experience, an endless process that enables the living to separate from the dead but without completely severing attachments. What has been less widely appreciated, however, and will thus constitute the focus in what follows, is the way Woolf’s rearticulation of mourning as an anti-consolatory and endless activity was stimulated by the cataclysmic traumas of the Great War of 1914–18. Vincent Sherry, among other critics, has made us acutely aware of the profound impact the war had on the development of Woolf’s modernist style; what is central to her modernism, I would argue, is an innovative model of mourning that steadfastly refused to “work through” the legacy of wartime loss. Indeed, some of the most disconsolate images in her fiction—the empty pair of shoes that Betty Flanders holds up after her son’s battlefield death in *Jacob’s Room* and the summer home ravished by the passing of time and the devastation of the war in *To the Lighthouse*—testify to Woolf’s effort to rearticulate mourning in light of the war years. Mourning emerges in these novels, I shall show, as a personal and social labor based on sustained rather than severed attachments to loss.

With Woolf’s conception of ongoing mourning in mind, I intend in this chapter to explore how her novels resist consolation, as well as show how this resistance emerges as a specifically gendered assault on conventional mourning. Consolatory beliefs during and immediately following the Great War assumed a variety of symbolic forms; those of particular interest to Woolf include religious immortality,