

“NOTHING IS KNOWN”: THE LABELLING OF THINGS AND MISFITS AS A CRITIQUE
OF THE GREAT WAR IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S “THE MARK ON THE WALL” AND *MRS.*
DALLOWAY

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ABSTRACT

There has been substantial work done by critics over the years into the materiality of Virginia Woolf's writings, which has in turn shaped and influenced the ways in which readers come to understand the often-complex ways Woolf presents the material world. This project will not only explore the ways Woolf depicts the power structures through which patriarchal definitions of human subjects and of non-human objects exist in "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), but also in how Woolf further complicates that divide by revealing the difference between object and thing. Chiefly using Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" and Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, this project will demonstrate how both texts suggest the ways in which the thingness of the mark and of Septimus operates in terms of their excessive states, which resist containment by established logic or language and in turn challenges the anthropocentric thinking that privileges human over nonhuman existence. From this challenge of human superiority, Woolf's texts ultimately offer a judgement on war and violence as it stems from the former, a critique presented in the internal monologue and thoughts of the narrator of "Mark on the Wall" and of Lucrezia and Clarissa Dalloway's limited third-person points of view in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Through the perspectives of her female characters, Woolf suggests a vision for a proto-ecopacifist society where the disruptive potential of vital materialism is recognized by female characters and represented in the text as an alternative to the patriarchal institutions that rely on subject-object relationships. This project will not only expand on the already well-established scholarly work done on the materiality of Woolf's writing, but also use a combined material, ecocritical, and feminist approach to Woolf in order to explore the power of nonhuman matter and the differences between object and thing that are central to women's perspectives on social norms in "The Mark on the Wall" and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

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In both “The Mark on the Wall” (1917) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Virginia Woolf depicts the power structures through which patriarchal definitions of human subjects and of non-human objects dominate the everyday operation of British society. Those definitions rest upon a hierarchical divide between subjects and objects through which subjects use objects for specific and pre-determined purposes. However, Woolf complicates this divide and reveals the difference between objects and things; that is, between matter as it has a social function or significance, and things, which emerge, as Bill Brown notes, when the material dimensions of objects become evident and “assert their presence and power . . . when they stop working for us” (“Thing” 3-4). The narrator in “The Mark on the Wall” experiences the thingness of the mark through her attempts to identify and define what she sees. That the mark resists definition in the eyes of the narrator offers new and generative ways for the narrator to interact with it. This grouping of human viewer and nonhuman mark forms an assemblage and an alternative, disruptive vantage point that leads the narrator into a critique of patriarchal structures. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, those social structures prove inadequate in defining Septimus Smith, as both the need and failure to categorize the war veteran reveal his position as a “misfit”¹. Like the mark, Septimus resists the “logical” categories that would label him and dictate his proper role, whether these be gendered or medical. Both texts suggest the ways in which the thingness of the mark and of Septimus operates in terms of their excessive states, which resist containment by established logic or language. This reveals in Woolf’s work what Jane Bennett calls vital materialism, which allows for a repositioning of the human subject and challenge to patriarchal and hierarchical thinking, and a move towards the centering of nature and a different understanding of experience. Woolf’s texts ultimately offer a judgement on war and violence as it stems from the former, a critique presented in the internal monologue and thoughts of the narrator of “Mark on the Wall” and of Lucrezia and Clarissa Dalloway’s limited third-person points of view in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Through the perspectives of her female characters, Woolf suggests a vision for a proto-ecopacifist society. Vitality capability of matter, the result of which are “things” and misfits, reveal the different ways in which people are able to relate to the natural world, and the female characters of Woolf’s texts demonstrate another way of being, where horizontal rather than vertical interactions are

¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson uses the term “misfit” to note an individual who is incapable of fitting into an environment. Garland-Thomson notes the difference between fitting and misfitting refers to “an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction” (592).

possible. The removal both of the mark and of Septimus reveal how “things” and misfits are unable to work within the patriarchal system, but the disruptive potential of vital materialism is recognized by female characters and represented in the text as an alternative to the patriarchal institutions that rely on subject-object relationships.

Woolf’s texts depict not hierarchies of value and agency, as much as interactions and intersections among human and non-human matter. Recent Woolf scholarship has engaged with the materiality that Woolf depicts in her texts, often through an ecocritical approach, to demonstrate the significance of nonhuman matter. Derek Ryan, working from his reading of Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” to analyze a number of Woolf’s texts, posits that “Woolf theorises the creative, immanent materiality of human and nonhuman life [. . .] Woolf’s writing offers new conceptualisations of the material world where the immanent and intimate entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies are brought to the fore” (4). Woolf’s texts attend to not only the human, but also to the ways in which the human is a single member among the many pieces of the material world. Leanna Lostoski-Ho applies to Woolf’s texts Jane Bennett’s theory of vital materialism, which considers the mutually impactful relation between human and nonhuman matter. She argues that in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, “Woolf brings the nonhuman world to the forefront of her narratives in order to challenge the primacy of human agency in her decentering of the human and recognition of the vitality of all matter” (54). Though leaning heavily on ecocritical theories that place importance on the natural world, Lostoski-Ho makes the distinction that in Woolf’s texts “one must look beyond strictly ecocritical approaches that often only focus on the organic and natural worlds,” and emphasizes “[o]bject-oriented theories of materialism [that] equally consider organic and natural as well as inorganic and human-made materialities in their analysis of the nonhuman world” (55-56). Where Lostoski-Ho uses the theory outlined by Bennett for her analysis, this paper will discuss Bennett in conjunction with Brown’s “Thing Theory” in order to explore the power of nonhuman matter and the differences between object and thing that are central to women’s perspectives on social norms in “The Mark on the Wall” and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The interactions between human and nonhuman matter in Woolf’s texts are marked by an event in which objects – items that have a specific and socially predetermined use – are misused or unusable in a traditional way. As Brown notes in “Thing Theory,” an object is determined in its utilization by and relation to a human subject. In contrast, a thing arises from the object’s

“changed relation to the human subject and thus . . . names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (“Thing” 4). Brown applies this concept directly to Woolf’s work, where “the ‘thing’ registers the undignified mutability of objects, and thus the excess of the object (a capacity to be other than it is)” (*Other* 50). Brown claims that Woolf’s texts engage with this ability for objects to become altered in terms of human perception of their status – a process that Brown calls the “fluidity of objects” (55) – where they resist conventional use and become something else entirely. Douglas Mao argues that, in modernist writing more generally, there is “an admiration for an object world beyond the manipulations of consciousness” (11). Mao identifies not only the differences between materiality and the mind that classifies that matter, but also the ability for materiality to influence the mind. Brown, however, provides more specific language for moments at which that distinction is blurred and the human subject can no longer define the object in terms of human use. This “difference between the apperceptive constitution of the thing, in what I would call its *objecthood*, and the experience of the thing, in what I would call its *thinghood*, emerges in the moment (and no doubt only as a moment) of reobjectification that is a kind of misuse” (*Other* 59; Brown’s emphasis). The moment that Brown notes where object becomes thing and exceeds human definition in its materiality is similar in many ways to Bennett’s vital materialism. Bennett uses the term “thing-power” to denote the effect of objects exhibiting vital materiality: it is “the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies” (3). Brown and Bennett both consider thingness to emerge during an encounter, where objects perceived as things gain a kind of autonomy apart from the human subject in that object’s estrangement from conventional use. Applying both Brown’s thing theory and Bennett’s theory of vital matter to Woolf’s texts provides a framework for understanding not only the importance placed on objects themselves within “The Mark on the Wall” and *Mrs. Dalloway*, but also the intricate and complex interactions and interrelations between human and nonhuman matter.

When the narrator in “The Mark on the Wall” observes the titular mark, it is the materiality of the object, rather than its functionality, that is revealed. The mark becomes what Brown calls a “thing”: it exists at “the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and the unidentifiable” (“Thing” 5). The narrator is even unsure as to when the mark first appeared and can only speculate that, “[p]erhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that [she] first looked up and saw the mark on the wall”

(235). The mark's presence suddenly asserts itself, and its origin remains unknown. This gives the mark a sense of active autonomy: it arrives and appears in front of the narrator on its own. The narrator attempts to establish the meaning of the mark as well, but apart from a vague and basic description, she is unable to discern from where she sits what the mark is or how it was formed. Her attempt to do so demonstrates an initially conventional approach to understanding the material world that emphasizes the human subject's centrality: "we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*)" (Brown, "Thing" 4; Brown's emphasis). However, the mark resists objecthood, as indicated by the narrator's inability to identify it. Instead, the narrator ruminates over what the mark *could* be, and from these possibilities the narrator explores different trains of thought according to aspects of British society, history, and culture. For example, it is from the narrator's primary identification of the mark as a nail that she begins to think of the previous homeowners: "[i]f that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature – the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations [. . .] for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way – an old picture for an old room" (235). Defined as a nail, the mark is able to disclose certain aspects of not only the lives of the previous homeowners – that they would choose old pictures – but also the Victorian era itself, where the appearance of the woman reveals the beauty standards of the time. Immediately after this imagined scenario, however, the narrator decides that she "[doesn't] believe it was made by a nail after all" (235), and the mark reverts from being a nail to being an undefined "thing" once more. This process, which continues throughout the narrative, demonstrates the thinghood of the mark as that quality is outlined by Brown: "*the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else*" ("Thing" 5; Brown's emphasis). Crucial here, however, is Brown's observation that "[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" (4). In the eyes of the narrator, the mark does not work as a nail, just as it does not work as hole, a rose leaf, or as a crack in the wood. In its emergence as a thing, the nail forces the narrator to consider the materiality of the mark rather than just its human-defined functionality.

The process of the narrator being acted upon by the mark establishes the mark as the actant and, therefore a source of thing-power, hence its resistance to the narrator's gaze—but hence also the narrator's willingness to interact with its nonhuman possibilities. Bennett defines

the “actant” as “[a]n operator . . . that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event” (9). The mark has an immediate and direct effect on the narrator in several different ways. Firstly, the mark is what begins the reveries of the narrator in this modernist short story. Secondly the mark is what the narrator returns to in a cyclical or spiraling fashion. When the narrator comes close to obtaining a definition or stable “truth,” her thoughts abruptly return to the mark. Thus, when she is led to musing about the materiality of death – “There will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour – dim pinks and blues – which will, as time goes on, become more definite, become—I don't know what....” (236; Woolf's ellipses) – her thoughts trail off and are followed by a paragraph break, and she turns abruptly back to the nail and undermines the basis of her previous line of thought: “And yet, the mark on the wall is not a hole at all” (236). Though mentally exploring history, society, and culture, the narrator never leaves the room, and her contemplations never stray from the mark. The mark is a force behind the assemblage it forms with the narrator. The mark is making things happen. It is an actant demonstrating “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett 6). As a form of materiality that ““hits the viewer,’ re-awakens a profound sense of wonder and amazement, and stimulates him/her to reflect on, and participate in making the art work” (Mildenberg 54), the mark is more than an object. It becomes both an anchor and an avenue for the narrator’s thoughts and is the site from which the narrator’s musings on British social norms are produced. Her willingness to interact with the mark is due to not only the thing-power it exhibits, but also the amazement she experiences in the encounter with it, an effect that Bennett describes as “being *struck*” by a thing that “command[s] attention in its own right . . . [and] provoke[s] affects” in the subject (4; Bennett’s emphasis). The narrator’s contemplations circulate around the mark, but it acts only as a front for her otherwise hidden preoccupations with culture, history, and society. In this assemblage, the narrator and the mark enter a reciprocal dynamic where a non-hierarchical collaboration between the two is established.

This generative, productive assemblage is disrupted, and its elements viewed separately when the narrator's male-coded partner² interrupts and returns the narrative focus of the text back to traditional modes of thinking. He reintroduces the hierarchical categorization of human and nonhuman. In "The Mark on the Wall," this becomes a gendered approach. Thus, Magdalen Wing-chi Ki notes that the narrator participates in the "female ordering of knowledge [which] is foregrounded to rely not on mechanical time or abstract representation, but on subjective time and the coordination of the five senses" (428). In contrast, she views the speaker as representing the patriarchal order, with his "love of newspapers (updates, facts)" (440) that indicate a normative system of official information. The narrator's experience with the mark is physical, in that Woolf's text engages the body of the narrator: despite the narrator choosing not to stand and use her body to physically inspect the mark, it is from the mark that the narrator places her entire self within imagined scenarios that she physically interacts with. For example, the thoughts the narrator has about herself begins with her imagined self physically "c[oming] into the room" and hearing that those inside the room were "discussing botany" (236). The narrator then notes that she had "seen a flower growing on a dust heap" (236), which not only evokes the sense of sight but also of smell in the mentioning of flowers. Despite not leaving her chair, the narrator has a material experience that involves so many of her senses – sound, sight, and smell – as well as her mind – whereas the partner engages in an empirical mode of categorization in that he looks at the mark, deduces it to be a snail, identifies it as such, and ultimately decides that it must be removed.

The partner's identification of the mark as a snail and his own perspective that it is out of place demonstrate the hierarchal systems of a larger patriarchal society, which has pre-determined value judgements that prioritize the human instrumentalization of nonhuman matter, and do not allow for the horizontal assembly, the assemblage, formed between the narrator and the mark. While the narrator is engaging with the mark in a relationship that allows it to act upon her and direct her thoughts, the partner quickly dismisses any use for the mark at all: "I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall" (238). The partner re-replaces the "thing" back into its object-position – an object that has no value to him in the house – and views the narrator and the

² Though gender is not explicitly mentioned for either the narrator or her partner, scholars like Bette London have employed the use of "gender-coding" to suggest that their differing actions and interests point to the narrator being female and her partner as male (182).

mark as separate rather than perceiving them, as the narrator does, in formation with one another. The partner evaluates the snail's improper place on the wall within the house rather than in the garden and, thus, regards the snail through anthropocentric thinking that privileges human over nonhuman existence. According to Bennett, this mode of thinking "places humans at the ontological center of hierarchal apex" (11); here such dominance is deliberately linked by Woolf to patriarchal systems of thought. Bette London argues it is this hierarchal thinking that forces the narrative to its conclusion: "[t]he masculine intervention of the discourse of 'fact' . . . closes the story by foreclosing the woman speaker's inconclusive, self-proliferating text" (182). The events of the narrative take place over an indeterminate amount of time within the mind of the narrator, but the partner's classification of the mark quickly brings the narrative back to the external and human-centred world. No longer able to muse over the possibilities of the mark now that it has been categorized by her partner, the narrator is forced to regard the mark for what it *is* – or rather, has been defined to be.

Ironically, that patriarchal logic, which firmly designates the snail as an object, has been undermined through the narrator's recognition of the thingness of the snail and by her formation of an assemblage with it. The content as well as the form of the internal monologue embody the narrator's different mode of approaching the physical, material world, and her resulting though implicit challenge to its anthropocentric discursive authority, which lingers past the text's ending. The story concludes with the narrator's apparent agreement that "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail" (238), but the relationship previously made between the mark and the narrator has already established its thinghood.³ The mark cannot be completely reduced to a snail; in an assemblage created between a human and vital matter, where "*objects* [have] appeared as *things*," they remain on some level "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them" (Bennett 5; Bennett's emphasis). The lasting effects of the formation between the mark and the narrator are evident in Woolf's use of stream of consciousness narration. Marc Cyr proposes that the emphasis Woolf places on the narrator's thoughts and mental experience, rather than on an external identification of the mark as a snail,

³ The disruption of patriarchal, human-centered logic and systems of exclusions that can be felt even after the conclusion of the narrative evokes Brown's argument that "the very semantic *reducibility* of *things* to *objects*, coupled with the semantic *irreducibility* of *things* to *objects*, would seem to mark one way of recognizing how, . . . although the object was what was asked to join the dance in philosophy, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing" ("Thing" 3).

signals “that objective reality is less important than the world of perceptions internal to each individual” (197). What the mark “is” has not mattered to the narrator; in the words of Mildenberg, “[t]he point of her imaginary variations in this story is not to hit a final ‘mark’ or to make a ‘point,’ as it were, of the actual object, but rather to ‘restore wonder to the object’” (59). The narrator’s internal monologue thus reveals how she approaches the material world in a different way than that of her partner, through its possibilities and mutual effects. Those effects are evident on the page: in the story, “consciousness meets the object in immediate experience . . . making us aware of the story’s unfolding before our eyes” (Mildenberg 64). The narrator’s thoughts unfold as if in the moment. Her meandering monologues are marked and structured on the page through the use of hyphens, ellipses, and paragraphs that begin and end sentences, which resemble a stream of thinking rather than a series of authoritative declarations, like those her partner engages in. While the narrator rarely comes to any definitive conclusions from her musings – and never about the mark itself – the partner makes five different assertions in the four sentences he speaks: that he is going to buy a newspaper; that there is no use in buying newspapers because nothing happens; that he feels strongly about and is very much against the war; that the mark on the wall is a snail; and that there should not be a snail on the wall (238). The partner’s sentences all end in full stops, whether periods or exclamation points, and are short, concise, and clear. The punctuation makes these phrases authoritative, and the speaker’s privilege allows him the social confidence to speak in this way. The partner’s language directly contrasts the narrator’s approach to the material world, which puts emphasis not on anthropocentric thinking, that would restrict and reduce objects through hierarchal subjectification, but instead on the experience created by objects asserting themselves as things.

The declarations and statements of “fact” and of history that the narrator’s partner would seem to engage in through his references to newspapers, war, and objects are the topics that the narrator contemplates in her reveries, but that she also questions, as form and content reflect an alternative to patriarchal modes of thinking. The narrator’s thoughts suggest, that regardless of their authoritative declarations, men fabricate stories rather than recognize facts. Her musings over Troy, medieval origin stories of the British nation, William Shakespeare, and even Whitaker’s Table of Precedency reveal how history itself is a narrative created by those who control social norms to validate their claim to privilege, particularly as it is associated with the male upper class and upper-middle class. As the narrator points out after her digression into an

imagined Colonel's excavation of the South Downs, "nothing is proved, nothing is known" (237). The empirical process by which the colonel attempts to identify the historical purpose of the South Downs as either a camp or a tomb, including examination of the site, interrogation of historical records, collection of evidence, and conclusion of his findings in a pamphlet, all prove to be fruitless (237). He is still unable to prove anything. This subtle critique of the amateur anthropologist's attempts to conquer history itself leads scholars such as Mildenberg to cast doubt over the plausibility of the mark's identification by the partner and the narrator's acceptance of it as fact: "[h]aving offered various possibilities as to what the mark could be, the finality of the mind's last remark cannot but be doubtful" (59). Discrepancies in verb tense outlined by Cyr signal further reasons for questioning the definition of the mark as a snail, especially since it is undetermined for how long the mark has been there (198-9). More important, however, is that patriarchal systems and the empirical and Imperial modes of thinking that dominate them are questioned by the narrator herself throughout the narrative. The accuracy of the partner's final classification of the mark is thus equally questionable. Identifying the mark as a snail and thereby an object in need of removal is not necessarily reliable, especially when, as a thing, the mark is able to engage with and act on the narrator in other ways. The story indicates that, because they are based in restrictive categories and definitions of reality, patriarchal systems cannot account for complexity, for difference, and for nonhuman existence.

It is the lack of complexity in patriarchal structures that connects with the text's critique of war, where conflict is generated by such reductive systems and the ideology they enforce. Cyr asserts that while "the war is included in the peripheries of the narrator's thoughts, it seems the center of the companion's concerns" (203). Arguably, however, the narrator's thinking is consumed by the war, not just in her understanding that patriarchal systems based on a hierarchy of human and nonhuman matter create an environment that causes war, but also in her dismissive attitude towards men's attempts at identification and subjection through language use. Wing-chi Ki notes that Woolf's personal letters disclose that "she found the male justification and legitimation of war, and the 'patriotic sentiment' 'revolting', because 'wars and ministries and legislation' were 'invented presumably by gentlemen . . . who wished to dignify mankind' at great costs" (426). Such sentiments can be found in "The Mark on the Wall," where the narrator is, to quote Wing-chi Ki, revealing her "indictment of the Great War, Victorian conformism, and the male notion of (military, social, epistemological) order" (425). Not at all resigned to the

peripheries of the narrator's thoughts, war is critiqued from the initial image of medieval conquests to the point that the narrator is "relie[ved] the sight of the mark interrupted the fantasy" (235). The narrator further reveals her frustration of the male order through her understated but overt condemnation of men who benefit from such an order: "[h]ence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action – men, we assume, who don't think" (238). The conclusion the narrator arrives at is that systems of hierarchy, like Whitaker's Table of Precedency, should be "laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go" (237). The idea of "phantoms" in this instance is an example of how patriarchal ideology operates through social constructions: "[e]verybody follows somebody, such is the philosophy of Whitaker; and the great thing is to know who follows whom. Whitaker knows" (238). The vitality of the natural world, however, offers the narrator a "sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades" (238). Describing these authority figures as "phantoms" and "shadows of shades" (237, 238) decenters the human and highlights the importance of horizontal, rather than vertical, relationships between human and nonhuman matter. The danger that Woolf addresses in her short story, however, is that the patriarchal system that places humans as the ontological center leads to the marginalization of nonhuman matter and can also "authorize the treatment of people as mere things" and thus "the instrumentalization of humans" (Bennett 12). Bennett argues that the hierarchy of capitalist, Imperial economic structures rests on objectification, especially "when powerful humans exploit illegal, poor, young, or otherwise weaker humans" (12). As the narrator in "The Mark on the Wall" notes, "[e]verybody follows somebody" (238), and the vertical formation between human and nonhuman matter encourages the exploitative behaviour that leads to war, where the enemy is reduced to an objectification of evil that must be destroyed, and where the soldiers themselves are instrumentalized into violent tools for the conquests of the powerful men who benefit from a system of superiority.

Woolf's implicit challenge in "The Mark on the Wall" to the hierarchal thinking that leads to war becomes an explicit critique of the effects of that thinking on actual bodies in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The character of Septimus Warren Smith experiences the instrumentalization of young men as soldiers by patriarchal systems in that he is objectified as a soldier during and after the Great War. He is deindividualized according to his patriotic duty or function, seen not as a separate person but as part of one objectifiable entity that adheres to the

reductive discursive system that generates conflict. While at war, Septimus becomes an object. During his time in Italy, it is deduced that – after the death of Evans – “he could not feel” (115) any emotion. Instead of allowing himself to grieve, Septimus “congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably” (115). His ability to not feel, realized only after the death of the man with whom he had an affectionate relationship, is not only an example of how the “developed manliness” that “the War had taught him” (114, 115) makes him successful as a soldier, but also how the war succeeds in blunting the emotions that would allow him to grieve. Rezia summarizes the rationalized view of war that Septimus develops in war and society adopts in peacetime when thinking of Evan’s death: “[b]ut such things happen to every one. Every one has friends who were killed in the War” (97). Instead of being allowed to grieve, such emotions are replaced with the hierarchal thinking that permits all those who participate in and support the war to justify the death and carnage of battle. However, a few years following his return to Britain after the end of the Great War, Septimus is no longer able to operate as either a proper civilian or a properly heroic veteran. Septimus resists categorization because of his trauma and because of his dislocation from hegemonic systems that enable the “pretensions to autonomy” of the middle-class white male subject (Bennett 16). Similar to the mark being a thing that does not work according to the logic of such systems, Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway* does not fit into the role that society intends for him.

Where the mark in assemblage with the narrator operates as a thing, Septimus’s excessive status places him as a misfit. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who is working with disability studies, defines the term as it reflects “an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole. The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together” (592-3). Septimus is not adhering to established or expected subject-object relations because, as Pam Morris argues, he is experiencing the events of the narrative differently from those around him. Where others in the novel’s interwar London define subjects and objects according to everyday systems of meaning, “Septimus stops interpreting and starts observing” (Morris 65), which leads to him experiencing reality in a different way. An example is when Septimus is acted upon by the “white things” (64) that appear to him in the park. These apparitions are “things” in that as objects they do not work *for* Septimus, but rather *on* him. Despite refusing to look at the “white things,” or the ghostly matter that is associated with his thoughts of “the dead,” Septimus becomes aware that it is

“Evans [who] was behind the railings” (56). Although Septimus is apparently able to recognize his dead commanding officer, Evans’s appearance is terrifying. When he later perceives Evans answering him and the “dead” approaching him, Septimus is horrified and cries out “For God’s sake don’t come!” even as a figure he at first identifies as Evans appears: “the branches parted. A man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans!” (100). Septimus is unable to interpret the appearance of Evans and of the “white things,” as physical and mental realities intermingle. In turn, his wife Rezia is unable to see or understand either, but does understand that what Septimus is experiencing does not conform to the expectations of the environment they are in. He does not fit, and so she actively attempts to hide him from the view of others. No one else is able to see these “white things,” and the highly personal – but socially unacceptable – assemblage created between them and Septimus demonstrates his position in an encounter that exceeds human-centred logic.

Septimus is also unable to “properly” interpret the objects and events of the motor car and the plane, resulting in an awkward relationship between Septimus and the citizens around him. For example, when Rezia sees the luxury automobile driving slowly down the street, she wonders, “[i]s it the Queen in there – the Queen going shopping?” (56). Rezia tries to look into the motor car to see who is inside, and she projects onto the car her own cultural assumptions of the meaning of an extravagant vehicle. She thus identifies the importance of the Queen as a symbol, who, to a foreigner like Rezia, is the chief representation of the British culture that “she admired in a way” (56) and the authority it wields in the world. Rezia is able to act upon the objects –to “look *through*” them, to borrow Brown’s language (“Things” 6) – to understand what they mean to the society and to her. Septimus interprets none of this. He does not look *through* the car to understand the cultural importance of who is within it. He sees only the motor car; he sees its “drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree” (56); he sees a physical object that he is unable to understand except as matter. Lostoski-Ho notes that “who is riding inside the motor car and of what importance they are to the British Empire is not what concerns Septimus. Instead, he continues to be alarmed by his realization that everyone is focusing on the same object, the motor car” (58). Here, Septimus is aware of the subject-object relationship that he is no longer part of, as he looks *at* the motor car and sees it differently. If, as Brown argues in “Thing Theory,” individuals participate in the process of looking through objects “because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful” (4), these codes are

maintained by the power structures that inevitably promote patriarchal definitions of human and nonhuman matter. Woolf exposes the operation of that ideology in her texts through the character of Septimus, who can no longer read or fit into this society according to those codes.

In not interacting with the events and objects around him in the same way that the rest of society does, he becomes an obstruction to the patriarchal system as well as being obstructed by that same system. What Septimus reveals are the limits of anthropocentric logic and the difference between human understanding and the vital materialism of the world which exceeds that logic. The failure of the system to encompass Septimus's different understanding can be seen in how the motor car itself, with its blown tire and inability to move and function as intended, becomes a "thing" capable of Bennett's thing-power. Lostoski-Ho notes that Septimus not only acknowledges the vitality of the car where no one else does, but also that "[t]he motor car in this instance has a vitality that Septimus recognizes as threatening, but the other onlookers simply share synchronized and simultaneous thoughts as they stop what they were doing and look at the motor car" (59). Those around Septimus do not perceive the vitality of the motor car, and instead see the automobile as a symbol of status and then patriotism. Benjamin D. Hagen argues that the motor car is intended to be interpreted as such an image, one that in its association with Buckingham Palace "attempts to speak of commiseration, remembrance, and mourning" following the Great War (542). Hagen notes that the difference between Septimus and those around him is that "the others watching the motor car only experience this image faintly, only adopt this desire for memorialization briefly" (543). In contrast, Septimus is "haunted by runaway images that continually accumulate for him yet eventually pass away for others" (543). His inability to move beyond the lived trauma conveyed by this imagery is what Hagen flags as key to understanding the repetition of the phrase that Septimus and the car are both "unable to pass" (55, 57). That he is unable to see anything but the vital materiality of the objects in front of him – and that such vitality does not go away – reveals how he is not only a hindrance to the patriarchal system in not playing his proper social role and standing out as different, but also how he is blocked by those same systems from moving forward. The images and "white things" that haunt and incapacitate him come from a war perpetrated by hierarchal, anthropocentric thinking.

Septimus is an obstacle, a thing that interrupts the flow of the crowd, and an object in a social sense, especially when he draws attention to himself and to Rezia through his "odd"

behaviour (97). Both arise from his link to vital matter. Like his response to the motor car, the scene with the plane demonstrates the discrepancy between Septimus's perceptions and those of the people around him. While other citizens attempt to interpret the letters that the plane is writing in the sky, Septimus believes that the "smoke words" of the advertisement "are signalling to [him]. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty" (62). Like the flat tire of the motor car becoming a "thing" in no longer working as intended, the letters the plane writes ultimately fail to supply him with any message and are therefore capable of a vitality that only Septimus can see: they are pure "beauty" (62). Hagen notes the difference between Septimus and the rest of the bystanders as "dramatiz[ing] a tension within *Mrs. Dalloway*—especially in this scene—between image and text, between looking (as Septimus does) and reading (as most of the others do)" (544). Though Hagen does not use either Brown's or Bennett's theory, his use of the words "image" and "text" can be viewed as synonymous to "thing" and "object": as an image or thing, the shapes are viewed without interpretation or meaning; as a text or object, the shapes are defined using words that have socially predetermined significance. Like the shapes themselves, however, Septimus becomes unreadable: despite Rezia's attempts to conceal that Septimus is talking to himself and crying, he is still regarded as "looking queer" (65). He becomes a misfit in his society, just as the motor car's tire and the plane's sky writing shapes become things that have a potential in excess of their intended place.

Septimus does not fit into the hegemonic norms of postwar Britain, particularly because he does not fit into the expected role of the soldier. His shellshock makes him a "patient" and places him under the control of his doctors, who enforce and uphold hegemonic social standards, and place Septimus into positions that are comprehensible in the patriarchal system. Christine Froula points to how "Sir William Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes—gatekeepers of a society strategically blind to its own violence—pathologize [Septimus's] reality" (147). Holmes defines Septimus according to a standard in which men are expected to adhere to a socialized masculinity. He calls Septimus's state being "in a funk," where the admission of suicidal thoughts is wrong only because it gives Rezia "a very odd idea of English husbands": Septimus must know that he has "a duty to [his] wife" and a patriotic responsibility to stop being ill (119). These are the same standards expected of soldiers: to hide emotions in order to maintain manliness. Holmes argues that he is qualified to make such claims on Septimus not because he

too has experienced the hardships of being a soldier in the Great War, but because “he had had forty years’ experience behind him; and Septimus could take Dr. Holmes’s word for it – there was nothing whatever the matter with him” (119). Even as Holmes undermines Septimus’s lived and continuing experience of trauma, and demands he fit into norms of masculinity, Septimus’s inability to adhere to hollow rhetoric and his subsequent suicide lead to Holmes’s labelling Septimus as “the coward!” (165). Though Sir William does not try to force Septimus to conform socially by using Holmes’s method, he defines Septimus medically, symbolized by his service to the goddesses Proportion and Conversion, who are quite literally authority incarnate (125). When meeting Septimus, Sir William determines “it was a case of extreme gravity. It was a case of complete breakdown – complete physical nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage, he ascertained in two or three minutes” (122). This diagnosis has a similar end to that of Holmes, though a different means. Whereas Holmes argues nothing is physically wrong with Septimus and he merely needs to uphold his duty, Sir William contends that the solution to Septimus’s nonconformity – a condition Sir William labels as “not having a sense of proportion” (123) – is to remove him from society entirely and place him in a country home. Removal becomes the answer. To quote Garland-Thomson, “the primary negative effect of misfitting is exclusion from the public sphere—a literal casting out” (594). It places the problem on the misfit rather than the environment in which they are not fitting and allows for the reinforcement of hierarchical segregation and marginalization. Nevertheless, in both Holmes’s and Sir William’s treatments, Septimus will no longer be able to disrupt the social norms: the excessive body of Septimus becomes an object, categorized through a diagnosis that classifies him authoritatively and once more secures Septimus within pre-determined roles.

Septimus reveals the inadequacies of the discursive system in which definitions are established by traditional authority figures, like Holmes and Sir William, who cannot see beyond subject-object hierarchies. There is a disjunction between their definitions of Septimus and who Septimus actually is, which exposes the shortcomings of the patriarchal system. Froula argues that “Septimus’s doctors act as agents for a society that scapegoats him for bringing home the murderous aggression it would disavow, that projects its aggression upon him and expels him” (148). Unaware of, or unwilling to admit, their society’s instrumentalization of Septimus for use in the war, Holmes and Sir William place the blame for Septimus’s behaviour solely on him. Thus it is Septimus’s inability to fit into the environment of peacetime Britain that is the problem

rather than the patriarchal system's inability to accommodate Septimus's difference. However, Septimus's lived experiences function as a critique of both Holmes's and Sir William's knowledge of the war as well as their classifications. Holmes's labelling of the war veteran as a coward does not accurately represent Septimus's past or present, as he has not only "served with great distinction in the War" (122) but actively defies Holmes's and Sir Bradshaw's control. Sir William's dismissiveness of Septimus's condition, which he believes "he ascertained in two or three minutes" (122), demonstrates his lack of understanding the full breadth of Septimus's experience, just as his sense that Septimus makes "a distasteful impression" (123) stems from the patient's challenge to the doctor's social and cultural authority. The physical, mental, and social realities of the war are not represented or accepted by these authoritative figures. Instead, the war is forgotten and glazed over to accommodate the existing society and its norms, including their own superiority. Septimus's existence stands in contrast to these preconceived notions and hierarchies, and, thus, he signals the uncomfortable disjunction between what society knows to be true, which is not true at all, and what individuals like Septimus experience to be true. Septimus's resistance to the labels placed on him by Holmes and Sir William demonstrates the patriarchal system's inability to fully encompass the complexities of materiality that exceeds social or cultural boundaries. And yet, Sir William's position still places him as the authoritative figure in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Septimus's refusal to allow either Dr. Holmes or Sir William to "get him" (164) reveals that he recognizes his object status in relation to these authority figures. It is understood by Septimus that if they were to "get" him, they would force him to comply to societal expectations – either in his submission to his role by Holmes or his exclusion from the environment by Sir William. In other words, they would reduce him to an object they can manipulate into functioning once more in society. Septimus understands this not only in relation to his own position, but also in how this is implicative of the society as a whole. Froula argues that Septimus is a "witness to the aggression instinctive in human nature" (146), and that he therefore serves as a visual reminder of human nature's predisposition for violence. Septimus repeatedly identifies himself as being a victim of human nature, noting that "[o]nce you fall . . . human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you" (124). Human nature, equated to and imposed by Holmes and Bradshaw in this instance, is synonymous with the expectations of the patriarchal system. It is the expectations of his society that Septimus fails to meet, and it is the

authoritative figures who support those expectations that are now attempting to enforce them. Like the tire that is replaced on the motor car when it no longer works, Septimus is to be made into something that fits or that will be removed entirely. Understanding he has only these two options, Septimus places himself as matter in his suicide. In his act of flinging “himself vigorously, violently down on Mrs. Filmer’s area railings” (165), Septimus removes himself in a material way – he is no longer Septimus, he is just a body.

Septimus’s awareness of patriarchal power and of how misfits are placed and labelled is shared by Rezia and by Clarissa Dalloway, who are both marginal figures to official patriarchal power. Rezia recognizes that Holmes is using medical authority to mask the social norms that he is actually imposing on Septimus; that men like Holmes “differed in their verdicts (for Holmes said one thing, Bradshaw another), yet judges they were; who mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted” (164). As a woman and a foreigner, however, Rezia is barred from making decisions regarding Septimus when Holmes comes to collect him. When Rezia attempts to stop Holmes from entering, he responds authoritatively: “‘My dear lady, allow me . . .’ Holmes said, putting her aside (Holmes was a powerfully built man)” (164; Woolf’s ellipses). Not only objectifying Rezia herself as *his* “dear,” Holmes also physically places Rezia outside of the decision-making process and takes control himself. Rezia also critiques Sir William, who she believes “had failed them! Sir William Bradshaw was not a nice man” (124). Rezia recognizes Sir William’s motives are not those of a caring doctor, but of an agent of the patriarchal system. Clarissa criticizes Sir William upon his arrival at her party in much the same way Rezia does after leaving his office, noting that “the sight of him, talking to Richard, curl[ed] her up [. . .] one wouldn’t like Sir William to see one unhappy” (191). On one hand, Clarissa does not want anything unpleasant – like the discussion of suicide – to intrude on her party; on the other, she recognizes what Rezia has recognized: she would not want Sir William in charge of her because he stands for division, exclusion, and objectification. Froula argues that “Clarissa, even while enjoying the worldly luxuries of her class, expresses a communal grief and desolation and a longing for solace” with Septimus (129), which is evident in her speculation that Septimus’s act of suicide allows him to maintain his autonomy: “[a] thing there was that mattered [. . .] [t]his he had preserved” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 192). Clarissa is able to acknowledge not only Septimus’s position as a misfit, but also his resistance to Sir William “get[ting] him” (164), and his success in avoiding being objectified by Sir William. Clarissa

recognizes the system by which Septimus is labelled through her own marginal position: though she is of a higher class, her position as a married woman barred from political or economic discussions leads her to be excluded from exclusive gatherings such as the independent Lady Bruton's lunch: "her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her" (69). Neither Clarissa's physical nor mental presence is desired at such gatherings – their "failure" is not in their actual malfunction as is in the judgement by those included in such gatherings as to having no use value – and as such she is dismissed from them. Lady Bruton, though having "the reputation of being more interested in politics than people; of talking like a man; of having had a finger in some notorious intrigue" (130) still must ask Hugh Whitbread and Richard Dalloway to help her draft a letter to *The Times* (133). While both Rezia and Clarissa are marginal figures in relation to official social power, and therefore able to notice the inadequacies of the patriarchal system, women like Lady Bruton use their position to enforce the patriarchal roles: Lady Bruton is not just involved with the restriction and containment of misfits, but also in their removal to Canada.

The narrator in "The Mark on the Wall," Rezia, and Clarissa, provide perspectives in Woolf's texts for the evaluation of patriarchal, Imperial thinking. They are Woolf's technique for undermining the authority of patriarchs. For example, like so many other "things" in "The Mark on the Wall," the barrows on the South Downs, in the narrator's musings, resist identification, and the process by which the Colonel attempts to label and objectify the landscape is proved inadequate. The narrator critiques the point in the Colonel's actions: the narrator deduces that the arrowhead found by the Colonel being placed in a museum is "proving I really don't know what" (237). The narrator continues, critiquing the process by which individuals, like the amateur archeologist and his infatuation with the South Downs, attempt to collect and categorize information: "what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits?" (237). The narrator does not attempt to seek empirical evidence of the South Downs, but rather considers the question of camps or tombs based on the way the South Downs makes her feel, similar to the ways in which the mark itself makes her feel: "[o]f the two I should prefer them to be tombs, desiring melancholy like most English people, and finding it natural at the end of a walk to think of the bones stretched beneath the turf..." (237; Woolf's ellipses). Like the mark, which has preoccupied the narrator throughout, the South Downs need not be anything specific so long as the narrator is able to perceive the vitality of the landscape and its

uncontained imaginative possibilities. That it is “natural” to think of the South Downs as tombs signals the narrator’s understanding that humans are – like every other living thing – mortal, and therefore not superior to anything else. The narrator – in much the same way as Rezia and Clarissa – is able to see the world from perspectives that anthropocentric ways of thinking cannot, and to perceive the ways in which “things” resist classification in a society intent on labelling them.

The women draw attention not just to the divisive effects of patriarchal classification and domination, but also to the histories behind the operation of power that has become normalized. The narrator’s observation that “once a thing’s done, no one ever knows how it happened” (“Mark” 235) points to the ways history is recorded, the ways reality is approached, and suggests they are flawed. Her doubt prefigures Bennett’s claim that “it is important [...] to open up space for forms of ethical practice that do not rely upon the image of an intrinsically *hierarchical* order of things” (12; Bennett’s emphasis). Hierarchy – and history – is constructed by those who benefit from its construction, and it fosters empirical thinking that is imposed to organize material experiences from a human perspective. What emerges from both texts, then, is a much more relational depiction of the human and the nonhuman, a vital materialism that intersects with eco-pacifist approaches to Woolf. Bonnie Kime Scott observes that, “[o]n a basic level, ecofeminist philosophers have critiqued the persistence of hierarchical binaries in Western thought, a primary example being that woman and nature fall on one side of the power divide, dominated by man and culture on the other” (8). Although Scott points out that the term “ecofeminism” was not available for Woolf’s use (8), Louise Westling notes that Woolf’s texts nevertheless present a vision similar to “ecological humanism” that “restores humanity to its place within the bodily community of earth’s life and refocuses attention upon the limitations and responsibilities that must humble our species if we are to survive” (872). Wing Chi-Ki argues that the narrator in “The Mark on the Wall” “offers an eco-critical view on the negative tie between nature and culture, as human disorder unleashes disorder in nature” (439), which can also be seen, Wing Chi-Ki continues, in the character of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Indeed, in an alternative to the patriarchal classifications of the retired Colonel, the narrator in “The Mark on the Wall” contrasts nature and war through the different images of trees. On one hand, the narrator recognizes the ability for trees to be exploited as resources both historically and for the military as “a naked mast upon an earth that goes tumbling, tumbling all night long” from the

nightly war bombing described as the “iron bullets of the moon” (“Mark” 238). On the other hand, the narrator also identifies other images of trees, ones where there is a decentring of human discovery and instead an emphasis on contemplation and recognition of vital matter and its effects. She reflects on wood as being “a pleasant thing to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don’t know how they grow. For years and years they grow without paying any attention to us” (238). The narrator is hopeful that society, like the tree, can grow independent of the hierarchal implications on display at the front and on the home front. The narrator contrasts the violence of war with the peace of nature: where the narrator previously avoids thinking of medieval images of conquest (235), the narrator instead *wants* to think of the tree, which she regards as being “full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts” (238). It is when society is unhindered by vertically divisive patriarchal systems that there can exist an acknowledgement of, as Bennett notes, the “active role of nonhuman materials in human life” (2). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Lostoski-Ho argues similarly that “Septimus continues to recognize the vitality of the trees to the extent that he feels corporeally connected to them” (60), pointing to how Septimus declares the “trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 62). Like the narrator, Septimus chooses to view trees as a source of calmness rather than a source of violence. More importantly, however, is that Septimus becomes entangled with the materiality of the park and to the trees themselves just as the narrator does when she notes she feels she has “grasped a plank in the sea” (“Mark” 238), and a horizontal relationship is able to form.

However, the potential of this focus on vibrant matter and the potential of human and non-human assemblages is ultimately limited by Woolf’s emphasis on the exclusions of social norms. Like the male partner in “The Mark on the Wall,” who intends for the “snail” to be removed, Sir William’s insistence on having Septimus removed to the country – and Dr. Holmes’s insistence on quickly removing his body via ambulance – demonstrates that their priority is to hide and conceal that which does not fit from the rest of society. Septimus is then used as an object with social significance by Sir William upon his arrival at Clarissa’s party by labelling him as a “case” of his in order to discuss a political bill with Richard regarding soldiers suffering from shell-shock (191). The retired Colonel of “The Mark on the Wall,” who “feels agreeably philosophic in accumulating evidence” (237) for the South Downs being either a camp or tombs, nonetheless relents to empirical thinking and does “finally incline to believe in the

camp” (237), ultimately using the landscape of the South Downs to create a narrative about the British past and to establish his own expertise on the topic at the local society he plans to attend before his stroke. Likewise, Sir William uses Septimus as a facet of his work, reducing him to a “patient” in order to establish his medical superiority in front of a member of the Government. In contrast, Clarissa comes to identify with Septimus in a material way, feeling his death: “her body went through it, when she was told [. . .] her dress flamed, her body burnt” (192). Clarissa recognizes the vitality of Septimus, like the narrator who feels the bones in the South Downs, and Clarissa enters into an imaginative assemblage, a felt connection, with Septimus. Rezia’s felt response to the loss of Septimus is similarly material, where Woolf emphasizes through third-person limited narration how “strewn she felt, like flying flowers over some tomb” (165). Like Clarissa, she is out of the scene itself as it occurs around her. Instead, she becomes an object for Mrs. Filmer and Holmes to not only take care of but also narrate as an object – Holmes says, “*her* husband was horribly mangled, would not recover consciousness, *she* must not see him, must be spared as much as possible” (165; my emphasis). Just as Rezia is forced to follow the directions of Holmes and, in turn, Mrs. Filmer who is following through on Holmes’s orders because it is the social expectation to “do as the doctor said” (166), Clarissa knows “she must go back” into the party and “[s]he must assemble” (194) socially following her visceral response to Septimus’s death.

Clarissa’s return to the party, and to her role as hostess to the Prime Minister, the doctor Sir William Bradshaw, her politician husband Richard, and the individuals conforming to patriarchal norms Lady Bruton and Hugh Whitbread, reveals Woolf’s emphasis that vibrant matter can disrupt society, but in this patriarchal order it is ultimately contained by authoritative definitions and social roles. Similarly, the narrative’s swift conclusion following the male partner’s identification of the snail in “The Mark on the Wall” demonstrates the ways in which experiencing life in different ways is restricted by British society. These moments of vital materiality demonstrate the complex relations between subject, object, and thing that are present with Woolf’s texts while simultaneously underscoring the limitations of the vibrancy of matter within a patriarchal society due to their eventual removal. Such reading of these texts gestures to the grounds upon which eco-pacifism can be a more prominent analytical strand of Woolf studies, especially in combination with the already well established feminist understanding of her texts, as it is through her marginalized female characters that Woolf undermines and critiques the

patriarchal order according to their ability to recognize the ways in which “things,” like the mark, and misfits, like Septimus, are confined and labelled within society. These characters highlight the opportunity for alternative ways of experiencing the natural world – where horizontal, symbiotic relationships between human and nonhuman matter are possible instead of vertical, hierarchal relationships of exploitation. This shift in relations marks a decentering of the human and a refocusing on nature and the human’s entanglement with nature therein. The disruptive potential of vibrant matter, though ultimately contained by social norms, signals a possibility for an eco-pacifist reading of Woolf’s texts and a consideration of the alternate ways to experience the world that are markedly different from the patriarchal institutions that are founded upon subject-object relationships.

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