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Susan’s Violence, Domesticity, and Discontent in *The Waves*

In Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, Susan exhibits strong emotions that belie her conventional life. Toward the beginning of the book, Susan states, “Though my mother still knits white socks for me and hems pinafores and I am a child, I love and I hate” (Woolf 16). She continues to intertwine those two emotions throughout the novel; the extremity of these two feelings reflects Susan’s passionate and sometimes violent state of existence. However, these extreme emotions are also interwoven with her mother’s domesticity: the word “though” sets off domesticity and passionate emotions as conflicting entities. Susan’s childhood proclivity toward passionate violence leads to a certain and calm domesticity that tries and fails to eliminate that violence. This failure creates discontent.

Susan uses violence as a means to combat aloneness and as a reaction against others’ intimacy. In the beginning of *The Waves*, Susan sees Jinny and Louis kiss. She repeats this observation three times, in three different ways: “I saw her kiss him. I raised my head from my flower-pot and looked through a chink in the hedge. I saw her kiss him. I saw them, Jinny and Louis, kissing” (13). Such repetition suggests fixation, and also an attempt to process. The phrase “I saw her kiss him” (repeated twice) fixates on Jinny (“her”), who initiates the kiss. Focusing on Jinny suggests Susan’s discontent with her own position and isolates Susan from Jinny. The image of “Jinny and Louis” emphasizes Susan’s singular state, furthering her isolation. Susan also physically reacts to this event:

“Now I will wrap my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief. It shall be screwed tight into a ball. I will go to the beech wood alone, before lessons. I will not sit at a table, doing sums. I will not sit next Jinny and next Louis. I will take my anguish and lay it upon the roots under the beech trees. I will examine it and take it between my fingers. They will not find me. I shall eat nuts and peer for eggs through the brambles and my hair will be matted and I shall sleep under hedges and drink water from ditches and die there” (13-14).

The word “now” comes directly after Susan’s comments on the kiss, suggesting that the kiss itself precipitates the following events. The use of the future tense verbs “will” and “shall” leave no room for uncertainty or vagueness. It is interesting that Susan never mentions becoming agonized; she only mentions “agony” as something that is either automatically present upon witnessing others’ intimacy, or as something that was already present. Presenting “agony” as a physical object (something that can be “wrap[ped]” and “screwed”) further emphasizes its concrete presence. Susan’s attempt to “wrap” her agony in her handkerchief suggest a desire to hide. In the next sentence, her desire for that agony to be “screwed tight into a ball” suggests her desire to minimize it. However, hiding and minimizing do nothing to abridge the object’s physical presence: Susan’s agony is something that she cannot destroy. In the next sentence it seems that Susan is attempting to cleanly break with her “anguish”: she “lay[s] it upon the roots under the beech trees.” However, the next sentence, “I will examine it and take it between my fingers” suggests a strong preoccupation and fixation on that anguish. While the act of “lay[ing]” the anguish on the ground seems to signify Susan’s moving past her grief, “examine” suggests the continuation of Susan’s relationship with anguish. In addition, “examine” and “take it between my fingers” suggests a profound curiosity about the anguish: though the anguish is Susan’s, it is foreign to her. Immediately after this passage, Susan passes by Bernard and Neville. Bernard notices that “her handkerchief [is] screwed into a ball” (14). It is interesting here than Bernard only notices the “handkerchief.” He sees the violence (“screwed”) associated with the handkerchief, but he is unable to see the actual agony that caused the balled-up handkerchief. This suggests that Susan’s attempt to hide her emotions was successful. A similar interplay between violence and intimacy occurs a few pages later, when Susan witnesses a kiss between Florrie and Ernest; she uses violent descriptors to describe that event. When Ernest kissed Florrie, “his mouth was sucked like a purse in wrinkles and he seized her with the pyjamas blown out hard between them” (25). The act of sucking to the point of wrinkles suggests a great deal of force; the verb “seized” denotes sudden force. “Blown out hard” suggests force, and perhaps a kind of sexual urgency; it also connects to the mouth, the main organ of intimacy in this passage. The phrase “swooned in anguish,” which Susan uses to describe Florrie’s reaction, implicates pain with passion. Could this be Susan’s pain, which she projects onto Florrie’s reaction? Immediately after this, Susan switches to describing a calm, domestic scene, in which Florrie and Ernest “pass plates of bread and butter” (26). Even in this calmness, though, Susan “see a crack in the earth and hot steam hisses up; and the urn roars as Ernest roared, and I am blown out hard like the pyjamas” (27). Reference to a “crack in the earth” suggests that this kiss has caused a kind of disturbance: the earth responds violently to this kiss. Even amidst calmness, Susan continues to relive the kiss she witnessed. She describes herself as “blow out hard,” which is the same phrase she previously used to describe part of Florrie and Ernest’s encounter; this suggests that the event has the power to affect Susan’s physical state, even after it is over. In addition, the repeated use of the word “blown” suggests a fixation on the mouth, and therefore on the kiss itself. Later, Susan draws an explicit connection between violence and emotion: “If I do not purse my lips, if I do not screw my handkerchief, I shall cry” (33). The future tense verb “shall” describes an action (“cry”) that results directly from the absence of two violent, physical actions: “purse my lips” and “screw my handkerchief.” The context of this quote is, once again, a situation in which Susan is isolated: it is the “first night at school” (32). Her isolation provokes violent reactions, which she feels she must stifle.

Susan’s domesticity is a matter of course: it is a default. Toward the middle of *The Waves*, Susan uses firm language to depict her future life and occupation as a wife and a mother:

I cannot be tossed about, or float gently, or mix with other people. Yet now, leaning here till the gate prints my arm, I feel the weight that has formed itself in my side. Something has formed, at school, in Switzerland, some hard thing. Not sighs and laughter, not circling and ingenious phrases; not Rhoda’s strange communications when she looks past us, over our shoulders; nor Jinny’s pirouetting, all of a piece, limbs and body. What I give is fell. I cannot float gently, mixing with other people. I like best the stare of shepherds met in the road; the stare of gipsy women beside a cart in a ditch suckling their children as I shall suckle my children. For soon in the hot midday when the bees hum round the hollyhocks my lover will come. He will stand under the cedar tree. To his one word I shall answer my one word. What has formed in me I shall give him. I shall have children; I shall have maids in aprons; men with pitchforks; a kitchen where they bring the ailing lambs to warm in baskets, where the hams hang and the onions glisten. I shall be like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards (98).

The verb “cannot” at the beginning of this selection suggests a physical inability. “Tossed” and “mix” both suggest some sort of chaos, while “float gently” suggests blind acceptance. Susan is physically unable to engage in chaotic, uncertain behavior. So, it seems, she turns to an obvious path: domestic life. The reference to “the weight that has formed itself in my side” could possibly relate to the agony and anguish Susan repeatedly tried to bury while at school and while witnessing the intimate acts of others. “The” suggests that this weight is a singular and importance occurrence, not something passing. “Formed itself” suggests the weight, rather than Susan herself, has autonomy and self-determination. It also implies that Susan does not know its exact origin. Continuing in the passage, Susan once again repeats that she “cannot float gently, mixing with other people.” Instead of social interaction, Susan instead preferences the “stare of shepherd” and gipsy women. A “stare” is a singular thing that can only happen between two other people. Within the “stare,” there is both isolation and intimacy; this seems to be what Susan craves. Susan then moves into descriptions of domesticity and motherhood. The phrase “suckling their children as I shall suckle my children” contains an assumption of motherhood, as well as the same combination of isolation and intimacy as the “stare”: the parallel clauses serve to connect Susan with the gipsy women, but it is a connection of parallel activities that do not intersect. In addition, the act of “suckling” is at once very intimate action between a mother and a child and a potentially isolating act of mere consumption. Next in this passage, Susan pictures her future lover’s proposal. However, she never describes her love—she only describes where he stands, and the answer she gives him (“my one word”). Her lover is only relevant in his physical proximity—a cure for Susan’s isolation?—and his ability to receive Susan’s weight. The sentence “What has formed in me I shall give him” suggests that, like in the beginning of the novel, Susan will pass her weight to her lover, thus breaking with it. In the last sentence of this passage, “silent” suggests a lack of interaction with the external world, while “locking up the cupboards” suggests the same kind of control and repression of emotion that Susan expressed in the beginning of the novel. Though it seems like Susan will break with or eliminate her weight, she does not. In her article *Virginia Woolf’s “The Waves”: To Defer that appalling moment*, Lisa Marie Lucenti sees the “blue apron of maternity” mentioned in this passage as guarding “private property and the social order by ‘locking up the cupboards,’ no less than the men in black gowns who keep blue aprons off of the turf and out of the library” (Lucenti 82). Lucenti sees the act of “locking” as a sort of return to a “prefabricated mold” of both domesticity and patriarchy; in aligning her life with a specific “mold,” Susan reaches for certainty and self-preservation. To be at once “silent,” domestic, and in the act of “locking” is a great departure from Susan’s intense, violent emotions in the beginning of *The Waves*. However, associating “locking up the cupboards” with “silence” seems to connect to Susan’s act of “wrap[ping] my agony inside my pocket-handkerchief” (Woolf 13-14). In both cases, a symbol of domesticity (cupboards, handkerchief) provides a means of control over violent emotions.

Even once Susan’s childhood violence has given way to domesticity, discontent and uncertainty mar her tranquility***.*** *The Waves* does not mention Susan’s engagement until it has already happened: there is a gap between Susan’s expectation of the event, and the point at which the event is spoken of as a thing that happened in the near—but not too near—past. Upon learning of Percival’s death, “Susan, engaged to her farmer in the country, will stand for a second with the telegram before her, holding a plate; and then, with a kick of her heel, slam to the oven door” (161). *The Waves* does not mention Susan’s engagement until it has already happened. In this passage, the event is referred to not as a thing that happened, but a thing that is. Also in this passage, a connection to past intimacy (“the telegraph”) immediately precedes violence (“kick,” “slam”). In addition, both that reminder of intimacy and the violence are inextricably connected with domesticity (“oven door”). But the violence domesticity happens after the arrival of the telegraph—in time to cover Susan’s emotions, perhaps, but too late to eliminate the intrusion itself. Later, Susan connects her domestic present with her violent past, and finds she is unable to eliminate the past’s influence on her present:

“I hold some scissors and snip off the hollyhocks, who went to Elvedon and trod on rotten oak-apples, and saw the lady writing and the gardeners with their great brooms. We ran back panting lest we should be shot and nailed like stoats to the wall. Now I measure, I preserve. At night I sit in the arm-chair and stretch my arm for my sewing; and hear my husband snore; and look up when the light from a passing car dazzles the windows and feel the waves of my life tossed, broken, round me who am rooted; and hear cries, and see other’s lives eddying like straws round the piers of a bridge while I push my needle in and out and draw my thread through the calico.

“I think sometimes of Percival who loved me. He rode and fell in India. I think sometimes of Rhoda. Uneasy cries wake me at dead of night. But for the most part I walk content with my sons. I cut the dead petals from hollyhocks. Rather squat, grey before my time, but with clear eyes, pear-shaped eyes, I pace my fields” (192).

At the beginning of this passage, “hold” suggests a degree of intimacy, or at least physical closeness. The fact that “scissors” are the object of this intimacy suggests the continuance of Susan’s violent inclination, and her connection of violence and intimacy. As she “snip[s] off the hollyhocks,” she remembers a scene from her childhood, where she and the others “ran back panting lest we should be shot.” As Susan remembers violence, she engages in an act of both destruction and preservation. “Now,” which starts off the next line, suggests a break from this violent past, but Susan “measure[s]” and “preserve[s]” through violence: she cannot escape it. At night, Susan again feels discontent. She is physically isolated from her husband, who is asleep (“snore”) while she is awake. She is “tossed,” which denotes chaos; “tossed” is also the word Susan previously used to describe something that she could not be. “Cries” are the medium through which “other’s lives” intrude about Susan’s present state. A few lines later, “uneasy cries” once again intrude—this time, they “wake me in the dead of night.” This time, they are not only an intrusion but an interruption: they alter Susan’s state of being (“wake”). The phrase “I cut dead petals from hollyhocks” is, once again, a means of eliminating the past; however, Susan resorts to violence yet again (“cut”) as the means of elimination. This phrase is very similar to the phrase “I hold some scissors and snip off the hollyhocks” at the beginning of the passage. However, the latter phrase uses “cut” instead of “snip,” and there is no “hold” to lessen the violent connotations. In addition, the mention of “dead petals” more directly suggests preservation. The cries that have happened in between these two similar phrases seem to have increased both Susan’s violence and preservation instinct; Susan commits violence in order to hide her emotions and preserve her person.

Virginia Woolf’s book *The Waves* follows six characters through childhood and adulthood. As a child, Susan witnesses acts of intimacy and reacts violently toward them. She eventually transitions to a very conventional domesticity, using calm, certain language that is free from her former angst. However, this peaceful domesticity is not enough to replace Susan’s violent emotions—it can cover over those proclivities at times, but is never able to eliminate them. In fact, she even resorts to violent means of elimination. Susan, therefore, is discontent—yet she tries (and fails) to smooth over this and envelop herself in her domesticity. In the end, domesticity is not a satisfactory match for passionate emotions, and is unable to supplant Susan’s anguish.

Works Cited

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