The Lightness of Weight

Living for one day, repeated on an endless loop, puts daily life into perspective. Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* discusses Nietzsche’s eternal return in terms of weight and lightness, in which one must choose to be one or the other. With weight, one feels burden, life’s burden of deepest fulfillment. With lightness, one is absent of this burden, one is “half-real.” While Kundera asks, which shall one choose, weight or light, Woolf responds by choosing both. *To the Lighthouse* proposes loveliness, or the unobtainable fleeting moment, and stillness, or the fixed, quiet absence of humanity, as answers to Kundera’s dilemma. Weight and light combine in loveliness and stillness to form the delectability of human existence.

*To the Lighthouse* is a book of spaces—spaces in thought, spaces among people, and even spaces in objects. Space, to Woolf, is the playground of the novel. When Mrs. Ramsay dies, Woolf does not linger on her death, nor the emotional reaction of the characters around her. Death is glossed over, even talked about in simple brackets before Woolf’s interest moves to the general layout of the house’s state once the Ramsays departed it. The house contained “what people had shed and left…those alone kept the human shape and the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated” (Woolf 129), painting a detailed image of what one can expect if they were to walk into this house. Yet, Woolf manifests life in the house by talking about the memories it keeps—not the events that one were to encounter, but the physical shape memories leave behind. The shoes keep the shape of a human foot, the buttons and hooks sit reminiscent of the hands that touched them. Woolf does not describe these objects in relation to someone specific, but rather, to the general humanity it served. It is not important to her
who held these objects—Mrs. Ramsay, James, Lily—but rather that after all people had left the house, these objects remain reminiscent of the beings that used them. This gives them meaning and an articulation of presence that Woolf is fascinated with—capturing the fleeting moment and immortalizing it. While the space within the object itself gives meaning to the object, the object itself exists in a larger space that was once inhabited by people, and that space is also a beacon of memory. All the spaces, and all of the objects that hold spaces, are evidences of their aliveness, the memory that someone once existed there. Though the objects are now empty, the great joy in their emptiness is that they once possessed life and that now that they are alone, they have become symbols of what once was.

The objects in the house reminisce their owners, but the house itself is Woolf’s way of preserving the best part of humanity—actually living in moments. She states, “day after day, light turned” (Woolf 129) and this description itself is one instance of Nietzsche’s eternal return. If one were to repeat twenty-four hours, what would their eternal day look like? To Woolf, it is the preservation of the moment that creates the beauty in material objects. Explicitly, Woolf states that the day “turns”, and earlier in the paragraph, stated that “the looking glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned” (Woolf 129) and so the repetition of the word “turned” stresses the action itself, in which the figure is spinning in a circle. As circles have no beginning and no end, Woolf places the eternal return in this passage to the emptied house, the objects in which spaces give meaning, and the memory of those who once inhabited it. Woolf’s main focus is not a specific person within the novel, but the space in which a community of people live. In the same paragraph, she states “the door opened, in came
children, rushing and tumbling; and went out again,” but this is not a present tense description—she talks about the memory of children running in and out the corridor. As vividly as the paragraph imagines the children’s actions, as quickly as they fade, but in this memory, in imagining children playing in the corridor, the author captures the intangible moment.

From the description of the house, the narration moves itself onto what is at the core of empty spaces and memories of what once was—loveliness and stillness. Woolf writes:

“So loveliness reigned and stillness and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted; solitary like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude though once seen.” (Woolf 129)

Her language indicates “loveliness” as the sovereign ruler and “stillness” as its partner, putting “loveliness” as the most important figure in this relationship. She specifies that loveliness and stillness together creates a form without life, as indicated in the previous quotations; the objects listed in the previous paragraph—shoes and buttons—are indeed without life, but represent the life they once held. Life itself is not the most priceless desire Woolf is after in this novel, the same as death is not the most important event, as evidenced by her lack of time spent discussing Mrs. Ramsay’s death. Instead, the novel presents a picture of a pool seen from a train window, gone as soon as it appeared and almost seemingly disappearing from one’s reality. In the same way the house captures what was once alive, the picturesque instance of seeing a pool of still water and watching
it disappear captures the moment. It is not that the pool did not exist, but that the pool has passed, passed without being disturbed. A voyeur from within this figurative train has no affect on the pool, but the pool affects him or her, resonating in memory and moment. The cover of the novel* presents a sandy shore where people sit and play in the distance, yet the majority of the image shows a lighthouse in the distance of the ocean, capturing the same moment that Woolf interprets in her passage. The haziness of the lighthouse, the carelessness of those on shore, the still ocean waters—the moment resonates with the loveliness of the aesthetic, intertwined with the stillness of the waters, sands, and seated people. The novel struggles to capture these moments, whether through imaginary instances or memories of the Ramsays, accurately portraying the moment that one wishes to capture, but cannot grasp completely.

The passage continues by palpably describing the relationship between loveliness and stillness:

Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs event he prying of the wind and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs…reiterating their questions—“Will you fade? Will you perish?”—scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain (Woolf 129)

Different from the first part of the paragraph, Woolf now delves into the relationship between loveliness and stillness. Loveliness, the absence of what is and instead reminds of what once was, intimately connects with Stillness, the calm of the moment and the pause in time. Their relationship, seemingly innocent, takes them to the bedroom at
which Woolf’s details on what they do and feel becomes microscopically palpable—the reader can feel the seeps of air from the prying wind, sense and smell the clammy sea, and after heavy descriptions, she relieves the reader with the last two words of the paragraph—we remain. The novel has, on this page, described the image of a still moment, described what one can see from it as well as imagine from it. However, at this point, the novel relieves the reader, indicating that the reader has felt an internal change, or the necessity to be relieved with the words “we remain.” By the end of the paragraph, the author has taken on what Nietzsche and Kundera believe is life’s “greatest burden”—capturing the essence of humanity. The weight of humanity resides in the desire to remain frozen in time, the desire to create an eternal return, the desire to adequately feel one’s life as “more real and truthful” (Kundera 5). Mrs. Ramsay’s death does not create the heaviest burden, though her influence and absence felt throughout the rest of the novel, but the simplest moments, the moments in which action is not only possible, but had once happened, are the heaviest burdens. The joy of life, the sting of death, these instances are not only natural, but expected. There lies more imagination in what once was, in relieving the happiness of a paused moment, that does not lie in life beginning or ceasing.

Yet burden is not the only feeling that is evidenced in the passage. With the many references to light, not only in choice of repeating words such as “light” and “reflected”, Woolf simultaneously intertwines freedom of the soul, or lightness, into her passage. While Kundera’s piece stressed the question, “What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?” and Woolf chooses to intertwine both, embodied in loveliness and stillness. While “loveliness” remains the weight that drags the soul down to the earth, the weight
that allows the reader to feel present in the moment, “stillness” is the light that frees the soul, that allows the reader to feel “half real” and transcendent from the moment. The reader not only feels the weight of the empty shoe in the empty house, but sees the imagined foot it once housed, hears the imagined laughter of children once present—and suddenly, there is a lightness in such happiness. Happiness of the past, or happiness recycled in the empty shapes of material objects, it is a happiness that pushes the soul into transcendence because it depends on making the fleeting moment looped; the paradoxical relationship between time freezing and time passing allows for the burden of the soul to reach the essence of what it means to be human as well as the tearing free from the conventions of the earthly. Time is, after all, a human construct. Once the moment breaks time, pauses it, the soul lives in the eternal return and becomes light. For this reason, the reader feels relief when Woolf writes, “we remain” because the reader is unconscious of the intricate struggle between weight and light. “We remain” indicates that after everything, the reader will have the moments that stop time and replay serenity and the delectability of humanity, even if time passes to the point of the reader aging. The remembered incident will remain with the reader after everything else departs, even those that helped create the moment.

Woolf’s paragraph immortalizes a moment that speaks of many people and refers to no one in particular. Instead, the moment is a collective example of the human presence, a removal from one specific character. She does not spend time talking about the Ramsays or Lily Brescoe, and even the objects left in the house are left ownerless—however they are left as belonging to a person. While this statement may seem repetitive, it is the idea that the owner, one of the Ramsays, has been removed. Coupled with the
lightness of the weighted, eternal memory, the moment becomes a small return to
paradise. At the most basic level, as discussed in the last chapters of Kundera, the ego
keeps the human from entering a true state of paradise. The eternal return breaks this
barrier down, and Woolf continues it powerfully, removing identity from memory. The
house is not described as the Ramsay’s, neither the children given names, nor the objects
given owners, but it is collectively described as a human memory, a memory that the
reader connects to as well as the characters themselves.

In this miniscule portion of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf answers Kundera’s
dilemma—there is no reason to choose weight or light when both are essential to form
the human existence. The balance between both, as well as the clashing of both, allows
moments to remain in the human mind. There is no moving forward in humanity without
some sort of desire or longing—James desires to go to the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay
desires her husband to be kinder to their son, Lily desires to be inspired to finish her
painting—and the paradoxical identity of weight and light allows for the longing to mesh
coherently. Because weight and life intertwine, all their complexities taken into account,
they form the perfect balance for humanity, humanity that is more often than not, itself, a
constant struggle of desire, fulfillment, and transcendence.
* cover of the novel as described in the essay