

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
the Novel Club of Cleveland
March 1, 2016

The March 1 meeting of the Novel Club, hosted by Leon Cabinet and Ted Sande, was held in the elegant Moreland Hills home of Jay and Toby Siegel, where members of the Novel Club gathered to discuss Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The Siegels' house rests atop a sloping hill high above River Mountain Drive. A perfect setting. For, in general, it is best to discuss Mrs. Woolf's novels from a higher elevation, preferably following a bit of wine and cheese. So thanks to all.

And even heartier thanks to house-host Jay, who stepped in to lead the discussion in the absence of Anne Ogan and who previously had stepped in to take the minutes of the February meeting in the absence of Tom Slavin. The minutes were approved without discord, treasurer Ham Emmons proclaimed the club's solvency, and Leigh Fabens, chair of the book selection committee, promised soon to unveil a still-developing list of novels for the coming year. The membership welcomed guest David Welshhans

The evening's speakers were Jane Hammond, who presented the Woolf biography, and James Saunders, who presented the critical analysis.

Both speakers began their addresses with an apology. Jane apologized because, as she explained, she is southern-born and Southern women always begin their undertakings with an apology. So she apologized . . . just because.

James apologized for what he called his habitual "droning" on the nature of time in his past presentations. Since the nature of time has bothered the minds of thinkers from Heraclitus to Hawking as well as most of the world's poets and philosophers, there is no reason it should not afflict the minds of Novel Club members as well. Both apologies were rejected.

Because, in fact, both papers were splendid.

Biography: Jane Hammond

Born in 1895, Virginia Woolf was raised in the patrician household of her eminent historian father, Sir Leslie Steven, and his wife, the beautiful Julia Duckworth. It was a second marriage for both; the family included two sons and a daughter from Julia's first marriage as well as four children from the Stephen marriage: Vanessa, Thoby, Adrian, and Virginia. Though all four sons were public-school and Cambridge educated, Virginia and Vanessa, being mere girls, were taught by tutors at home. The four Stephen offspring were high-

spirited, bookish, imaginative, and quite beautiful; however, their home, as Jane notes, had its dark corners as well. Both Duckworth sons trapped and abused their half-sisters. According to Jane, many believe these assaults were implicated in Virginia's inability to have a successful heterosexual alliance.

Following their father's death in 1904, the four Stephen children moved from Kensington to a house in Bloomsbury, and there began one of the most productive periods in English literary and artistic history: the gathering of some of the country's best educated, youthful elite: E.M. Forster, for instance, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Duncan Grant, the Woolf siblings with their own gifts, and Leonard Woolf, whom Virginia married in 1912.

Her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published in 1915; *Mrs. Dalloway* was her fourth. Both were heralded for her experimentation with voice, interior monolog, and stream of consciousness, which are the literary devices that became hallmarks of all the novels to come.

From around the age of 13 until her death in 1941, Virginia Woolf endured bouts of severe depression, often preceded by attempts to kill herself, which were treated unsuccessfully with the brutish therapies of the time. Though her recurrent illnesses shadowed their marriage, the bond between Leonard and Virginia was strong and productive. According to Jane, Virginia's recovering periods of intense literary effort and her successes owed much to Leonard's unwavering devotion. In 1941, two years after England declared war on Germany, Virginia Woolf placed heavy stones in her pockets, stole from the house, and drowned herself in the River Ouse, leaving behind several versions of a suicide note, striving for literary perfection even unto her death.

Analysis: James Saunders

Happily, there was not even the whisper of a drone flying overhead in James's presentation. He did as promised speak about Time and pointed out how the clanging of Big Ben and the recurring *Cymbeline* refrain ("Fear no more the heat of the sun") clocked the passing of the hours in a novel that confines its action, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, to the wandering of one character, Clarissa Dalloway, through a bustling city on a single day as she shops for flowers for a party she will give that evening. The party centers the plot, drawing together the men and women who have appeared throughout the novel, either in person or in the recollection and observations of others. James drew attention to Mrs. Woolf's lyrical mastery of interior monolog, and stream of consciousness--pioneering techniques for her time--that create a shifting, impressionistic reality. According to James, the book's characters experience "moments of being" that break through memory into revelation. These moments advance the narrative and enrich our insight into the characters and, within the text, their own understanding of themselves. There are abrupt, disruptive breaks as well: a Rolls Royce that backfires noisily, eliciting fears of gunshot and memories of the battlefields of Europe-- an episode that Mrs. Woolf then ironically recasts

as a prurient interest in which of the Royals may be hiding behind the car's curtains. Death too is a frequent intruder: in the reminders of Clarissa's unspoken illness, in the *Cymbeline* repetition, in mad Septimus's raging monologs. News of Septimus's suicide during her party is the ultimate intrusion, briefly shattering Mrs. Dalloway's dreamscape and forcing her to a reality that is best not to dwell upon--especially in the midst of a Westminster party.

Discussion, inspired by James's provocative questions, was, as usual, rambunctious. Some members focussed on Mrs. Woolf's beguiling narrative style, her use of interior monolog to elucidate character, the function of the characters' silent musings in advancing the plot. Other readers cited the social critiques embedded in the novel, drawing attention to class distinctions, to Sally Seton as a more liberated post-war woman, to the ineptitude of the medical profession in dealing with mental collapse, and the aftermath of the horrors of war itself. Further, they questioned the author's aim in creating Septimus, whether, for instance, he was Virginia Woolf's alter ego--perhaps a prescient insight into her own obsession with suicide. Or her comment on the wages of war? Or both? Others pondered the influence of Aeschylus, Euripides, Proust and Joyce on Mrs. Woolf's work, as well as her contributions to the artistic and literary culture of her own times and her enduring legacy. It was a rich and engaging discussion that drew to a close only as the clock struck ten. Time reluctantly to descend from the heights of Westminster, Regent Street, Green Park, and a quiet hill overlooking River Mountain Drive into the coarser world below.

Respectfully submitted and with apologies. . . just because.

Louise Mooney