Memoria est Imperfectus

If history exists as a fixed entity, clarity emerges in present time upon reflection of the past. If the past exists as an accumulation of unresolved perspectives, then there is no hope for comprehension of meaning. These two views convey a key difference between modernism and postmodernism. The texts Mrs. Dalloway, by Virginia Woolf, and Waiting for Godot, by Samuel Beckett explore this difference in relation to their own historical contexts. Both works conclude that a stronger attachment exists to memories of emotional significance. The emotional connection necessary to remember prevents accurate memories of historical events, thus allowing historical travesties, such as World War I and World War II, to repeat themselves.

While Mrs. Dalloway takes place at a specific historical time, in order to show the characters’ direct relation to World War I, Waiting for Godot eliminates any specification of time in order to convey the impossibility of historical memory without direct, emotional connection. The two views coalesce to promote the possibility of art as a solution to repetition of history.

A significant part of Mrs. Dalloway displays characters reflecting on their past emotions. Clarissa Dalloway and Peter Walsh continually remember a summer they both spent at Bourton in their youth. Both seem to recall the feelings attached to memories of events more vividly than the actual events. On the first page of the novel, Mrs. Dalloway compares a morning in Bourton to the present morning: "How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning... looking at the flowers, at the trees with smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" –was that it?— "I prefer men to cauliflowers" –was that it?"(Woolf, 3). From Clarissa's present state, Woolf creates an atmosphere from Clarissa's past triggered by the early morning air in London. While Clarissa cannot remember the exact words that Peter Walsh spoke to her, as shown by the repetition of "was that it?", she does recall that he interrupts her from "standing and looking"(3).
He changes the atmosphere and she remembers the feeling of the change. In the present moment, Peter Walsh's comment from years ago distracts her from appreciating the morning. As she recalls the similarities between the current morning and the morning from Bourton, Peter Walsh changes the mood of both occurrences. This duality shows how poignant the effect of Peter Walsh's interruption is on Clarissa Dalloway's memory. He interrupts her nearly twenty years previous, yet his interruption translates into the future as the memory of his interruption interrupts her thoughts again. While Clarissa cannot recall the actual words Peter says to her at Bourton, the memory of feeling lingers stronger than the memory of the event.

Reciprocally, Peter Walsh remembers interactions with Clarissa because of their lasting effect on him. Reflecting on his encounters with Clarissa, he says that the actual interaction is "brief, broken, often painful... yet in absence, in the most unlikely places, it would flower out, open, shed its scent, let you touch, taste, look about you, get the whole feel of it and understanding, after years of lying lost" (153). The event itself is not as important to Peter Walsh as the "understanding" that comes after it (153). Peter Walsh recalls the conversations he has with Clarissa and finds new significance in the meanings of the language and the feelings conveyed. There is less meaning found in the physical interaction than in the emotions and the verbal exchange. Like Clarissa, Peter remembers the moment's creation of feeling rather than the physical event of the meeting. Woolf's portrayal of memory as an emotional entity shows the significance of emotional memories over physical ones. Clarissa cannot remember Peter Walsh's precise words or the exact date of that morning in Bourton, but she recalls the effect of Peter's action on her emotional state. Similarly, Peter picks apart his interactions with Clarissa in order to find emotional meaning from the conversations. Both Peter and Clarissa's memories display the ease of recalling emotions and the difficulty of recalling actual events.

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, emotional memories are dealt with in a manner similar to Woolf's reverent display of memories in *Mrs. Dalloway*; however, the treatment of emotional memory is vastly different than the treatment of physical memory. Pozzo goes blind in the
second act of the play and remembers "Wonderful! Wonderful, wonderful sight!", displaying his nostalgia for a time when he could see the world. Vladimir allows Pozzo to bask in a memory of happiness, and when Estragon tries to bombard Pozzo with questions, Vladimir stops him: "Let him alone. Can't you see he's thinking of the days when he was happy. (Pause) Memoria praeteritorum bonorum — that must be unpleasant" (Becket, 99). Vladimir views Pozzo's reminiscent thinking as something to be preserved; therefore, he tells Estragon not to interrogate him. He sees happiness as a feeling worth remembering. The Latin phrase "Memoria praeteritorum bonorum" translates to "The past is always recalled to be good" and "rosy retrospection" (Triniwomansblog). These two definitions suggest a distinction between the actual emotions of the past and the emotions conjured upon reflection of the past. With his Latin quote, Vladimir hypothesizes that perhaps Pozzo's past is not positive at the time of its occurrence but when reflected upon, it is always positive. Vladimir thinks, "that must be unpleasant", in order to sympathize with Pozzo's frustration at remembering a romanticized version of the past, which is much more pleasant than the actual past.

The romanticized version of the past does not always include memories without emotional attachment. In Waiting for Godot, Estragon forgets events that occurred one day before. Vladimir asks Estragon if he remembers the tree from yesterday and Estragon cannot recall it. Then Vladimir says, "And Pozzo and Lucky, have you forgotten them too?", which Estragon responds, "Pozzo and Lucky?" and Vladimir exclaims "He's forgotten everything!" (Becket, 67). Vladimir implies that his own memories are the correct memories because he recalls the tree being in the same spot as yesterday and he remembers Pozzo and Lucky encountering them. Estragon thinks that Vladimir "dreamt it" (66). He is not convinced by Vladimir's memory. In this scene, Beckett ironizes memory. It is expected that Vladimir's memories are valid because in the first act of the play Estragon and Vladimir discuss hanging themselves from the tree and they interact with Pozzo and Lucky; however, this does not convince Estragon. He claims that Vladimir dreamt up the tree and he cannot remember Pozzo
and Lucky. He does "remember a lunatic who kicked the shins off me. Then he played the fool"(67). He remembers this incident because it has a direct influence on his physical state of being; he has bruises on his shins from the encounter. Estragon cannot remember anything that does not have a personal effect on him. He explains this by saying, "Either I forget immediately or I never forget"(66). Estragon's ability to remember reflects the memories of all people: they remember specific, relevant memories and forget others. It is ironic that Estragon's imperfect memory more accurately represents humanity than Vladimir's precise memory because Estragon is incorrect in not remembering the tree, Pozzo, and Lucky.

The significance between the two kinds of memories (direct versus indirect) in *Waiting for Godot* exists in the fact that postmodernism "is an attempt to make sense of what is going on now — and we can see the present clearly only in retrospect"(Powell). Memory is not an ability; it is a perspective. Since time is a widely debated facet of *Waiting for Godot*, the idea that when the second act occurs, the first act is a part of the past can also be debated. For the sake of argument, assume that at the time of the second act, the first act has already occurred. Thus, clarity of the first act may emerge in the second act if it is true that "we can see the present clearly only in retrospect"(Powell). Becket introduces the difficulties of memory in order to refute this idea. As shown with the quotation "*Memoria praeteritorum bonorum*"(99) and the discordance between Estragon's memory and Vladimir's memory, remembrance is a perspective that differs within each individual. No two people can remember something in the same way, and thus the past will always be debated. Estragon and Vladimir are extreme examples of this because one cannot remember and the other can; however, their different perspectives of memory convey the idea that memories cannot produce clarity.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf dispels this problem by displaying events of the past as fixed entities. Characters' perspectives of the past differ, but the events are definite and permeate throughout the character's minds. For example, no one debates the validity of the summer in Bourton. Clarissa reflects on it at the opening of the novel. Upon their first
interaction, Peter and Clarissa discuss it. Clarissa asks, "Do you remember... how the blinds used to flap at Bourton?" and Peter responds, "They did"(47). As banal an exchange as it seems, this question and response prove that both Peter and Clarissa have a fixed memory of Bourton. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon's debate about the tree, Peter and Clarissa do not doubt the existence of objects from the past. The events from the past are factual and because of this, characters exist on the basis of their past. Since Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus are all rooted in the past, the significance of their lives emerges through their thoughts. This significance or "central... non-image"(Powell) is a key difference between modernism and postmodernism. Powell says, "what fell apart in the modern era were the values of the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment... probably the main value of the age, besides reason, was the idea of progress"(Powell). During the Enlightenment, these values, reason and progress, were the center and significance of the lives of many people. They served as a purpose to life. During the modern era, these values fell apart and were replaced by an idea that the significance of life exists but cannot be comprehended. In Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa thinks of it as "A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter"(184). This "thing" is the center of her existence. Clarissa cannot comprehend it, but she believes that it is there. Her foundation in memories allows her to believe that meaning exists. The same thing is true for Peter Walsh, who says that with age, people gain "the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly, in the light... to extract every... shade of meaning"(79). Both Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway believe in the existence of significance, which can only be acquired through "see[ing] the present clearly... in retrospect"(Powell). The common belief that events occurred serves as grounds for the belief in significance. In Mrs. Dalloway, memories create a basis for incontrovertible clarity, whereas in Waiting for Godot, memories instill chaos.

Historically, one reason for the difference between the purpose for memory in Mrs. Dalloway and the purpose for memory in Waiting for Godot resides in the distance of each text
from World War I and World War II. *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place seven months after the end of the World War I. The memory of the war is intact in the characters' minds. Just like Peter and Clarissa's shared memory of Bourton, the war provides a definite marker in the minds of all the characters. Each character has a direct or indirect connection to the war: Septimus fought in it, Peter Walsh escaped it by going to India, and Clarissa Dalloway admires people such as Lady Bexborough who are still suffering the effects of the war. With the war as a fixed event in the minds of characters, the characters go about their lives with hope for their "center... non-image" (Powell). The memory of the war serves to unite them, dispelling the chaos and disorganization in their minds. The war serves to unify the characters because they all remember it at points in the novel. With this unification comes the indescribable meaning and personal significance that Modernism tries to detail. The memory of the war, as horrific and awful as it is, serves to unite the characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* suggesting that there exists incomprehensible clarity and unity in the lives of individuals.

*Waiting for Godot*, on the other hand, is written after World War II and presumably takes place after the war. World War II spawned postmodernism and the belief that order does not exist in the world. The memory of the war does not appear to exist in the minds of Estragon and Vladimir. Instead, their view that emotions becomes romanticized with time, suggests that humanity romanticizes history, as the distance between the present and the two World Wars grows larger. Since the wars exist in the past, they are seen through "rosy retrospection" (Atriniwomansblog). Instead of learning a lesson from history, humanity romanticizes it. If Vladimir is the only person in the play who can remember what happened the day before, there is no chance that the characters will come to an agreement on the occurrences of history. The lessons learned from World War I did not teach humanity to not go to war. Instead, World War II occurred. *Waiting for Godot* suggests that memories cannot bring order to the world because they are too based in perspective: Estragon will always remember differently than Vladimir. Unlike in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the characters have no similar basis of
memory and cannot come to any conclusions.

   In *Waiting for Godot*, the difference between emotional memories and physical memories is that emotional memories are more easily recalled because of a personal connection to them. Evidence of this exists in Pozzo's ability to remember happiness but not to remember the events of the previous day and Estragon's ability to remember pain but not the tree from the day before. This idea, when expanded to history, suggests that the reason for history's repetition is that after a certain amount of time, historical events have no emotional influence on individuals because people who were directly influenced pass away. For this reason, James Joyce writes, "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to wake" (Ulysses). In *Mrs. Dalloway* there is a direct emotional tie from the war to the characters, but in *Waiting for Godot* had there been a war in Act I, Estragon and Pozzo would not have remembered it in Act II. For Joyce, perhaps *Mrs. Dalloway* is a point in the nightmare immediately after a historical atrocity, where people have not forgotten their immediate past. *Waiting for Godot* concurs with Joyce, suggesting that all humanity is mired in history without any ability to escape.

   If emotional memories are the only ones that can be recalled, then the only way to remember history is to establish an emotional connection to it. This is exactly what art does. The process of reading a novel or viewing a painting establishes a connection between an audience and another universe. Based on the construction of the universe, the audience relates to characters of a different time. Even in a universe as unlike reality as the one in *Waiting for Godot*, a relation is still formed regardless of the memories of the characters. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the connection allows for the formation of perspective in regards to World War I. Although memory is not an accurate method of recalling history, perhaps the end to Joyce’s “nightmare” exists in art (Ulysses).
Works Cited


