Fall 2012

The Currents of Modern London in Iris Murdoch and Virginia Woolf

Emma Hine

Washington University in St Louis
WUURD, the Washington University Undergraduate Research Digest, is published by the Office of Undergraduate Research once a semester each academic year. Applications for submission and Statement of Editorial Policy may be found online.

Follow this and additional works at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/vol8_iss1

Recommended Citation
http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/vol8_iss1/64

This publication is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research through Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu
Toward a Better Understanding of...

THE CURRENTS OF MODERN LONDON IN IRIS MURDOCH AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

Emma Hine

Mentor: Miriam Bailin

Georg Simmel begins “The Metropolis and Mental Life” by asserting that “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society.” To Simmel, modernity’s metropolis is characterized by this conflict between the individual and society; without the consuming social mechanism, there would be no modern city, but without independent elements within the crowd, there would be no growth or innovation. Both Iris Murdoch and Virginia Woolf explore this relationship between the individual and the crowd in their London novels, and the conflict is especially relevant in their treatment of the Thames. Woolf sees the London crowd and traffic as a current, a reflection of the Thames made up of individual lives. She connects the Thames and the crowd most clearly in her essays “Thunder at Wembley” and “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” and in her novel Orlando. Iris Murdoch is more fascinated with the social pressures that the city puts on individuals, and she expresses her characters’ struggles with society through their interactions with water. Many characters in her oeuvre experience a violent ordeal by drowning, and these moments, most involving naked characters, serve to distill the individual from the crowd. This project discusses the ways in which these two authors use water to portray the experience of the individual in the metropolis. Research for it involved extensive study of the authors’ novels, secondary sources, and urban theory, as well as time spent in London following the paths of characters and studying the importance of the Thames in exhibitions at the National Maritime Museum and the British Library.