

**FUSING FACT AND FICTION: BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE
NOVELS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf was noted for a preoccupation with the genre of life-writing throughout her career. Her aims when it came to reshaping the nature of biographical and autobiographical literature were numerous. She veered away from the aggrandising and patriarchal methods with which Victorian biographers tended to depict their subjects. She increased the focus on women in life-writing, examining and subverting traditionally prescribed gender roles prevalent in both her society and the literature that reflected it, and advocating a balance between male and female patterns of thinking. She also devised a method of incorporating both basic biographical fact and aspects of fiction into life-writing in order to approach a more truthful depiction of a subject's personality or character. This method is linked to the aforementioned balance of gendered thought patterns, since Woolf often aligns factuality with male thinking and the contrasting qualities of fiction, such as intuition, ambivalence and perspicacity, with female thinking. This thesis examines three novels which demonstrate Woolf's constant preoccupation with combining fact and fiction in order to capture the essence of personality. In her debut novel, *The Voyage Out*, she presents Rachel Vinrace, who must achieve a balance of male-oriented fact with female-oriented insight in order to fashion a sufficient identity for herself and to identify others in a selective and judicious manner, thus being simultaneously autobiographical *and* biographical. In *Orlando*, Woolf explicitly subverts the traditional Victorian biography by depicting Vita Sackville-West as a man who transforms into a woman and remains living for over 400 years. In presenting such a character, Woolf posits that personality consists of and is influenced by myriad aspects of a person's life that cannot be documented in the restrictive manner employed by Victorian biographers. Orlando's essence being obfuscated by manifold "selves" attests to Woolf problematizing attempts to attain such an essence. The same challenge is particularly important in her autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse*, in which she transposes the traumas of her own life into a fictitious narrative in order to achieve catharsis for her *and* her readers, and to present the difficulty in capturing the essence of character. The conclusion that Woolf eventually posits is that personality cannot be reduced to an essence, but rather that it consists of idiosyncrasies that are various, intertwining, and capricious.

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Introduction

Laura Marcus, author of *Auto/biographical discourses*, describes how “in the early twentieth century the desire of the literary ‘moderns’ to mark their absolute difference from their Victorian predecessors finds one expression in the construction of ‘the new biography’” (90). Biography was viewed as “the literary emblem par excellence of Victorianism, a product faithful to the old era’s habit of misapplied and exaggerated hero worship, with all its attendant hypocrisy and evasiveness” (Altick, qtd. in Marcus 91). In her article “Biography: Choice and Gender” (BCG), Victoria Glendinning alludes to this “habit” by recognising “two main branches” from which “all biography sprouts”; the first of which constitutes “the memorialising of distinguished men, calculated to emphasise their distinction and to minimise their weaknesses”, in works which “were often put together by old friends or family members” (64). The second kind “was written by the professional author who frankly needed a subject to write about, and found it in the lives of the illustrious dead” (64). Both these strains are also implied by Elisabeth Jay in her claim that “professional biographers have always been in the business of saving two reputations: their own and the subject’s” (ix). Virginia Woolf grew up amidst these trends, having been born in the same year that her father, Leslie Stephen, “accepted the editorship” of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB), whose purpose, according to Julia Briggs, “was to keep a national record of the lives of great men” (26). It seems safe to deduce that Leslie Stephen’s literary career had an overwhelming effect on his daughter. Briggs ascribes the aptness of “the young Virginia Stephen” equating “the possibilities of and constraints upon writing and the writing of biography” to “her status as ‘Daughter of the DNB’”, as well as to the fact that “not only in the household in which she grew up, but in the wider family group, biography was accorded high status as a literary form, and much practised” (25). It was Woolf who would come to note, criticise and often subvert Victorian biographical tendencies by focusing on the representation of identity and experience, as well the issues surrounding gender, in life writing. Hermione Lee, author of the 1997 biography *Virginia Woolf* (VW), elaborates:

[...] Woolf spent most of her life saying that the idea of biography is—to use a word she liked—poppycock. In her essays and diaries and fiction, in her reading of history, in her feminism, in her politics, ‘life-writing’, as she herself called it, was a perpetual preoccupation. (4)

Woolf hinted at her preoccupation with this genre in a letter to her brother-in-law, Clive Bell, written in 1908:

I have been writing [Woolf's sister] Nessa's life; and I am going to send you 2 chapters in a day or two. It might have been so good! As it is, I am too near, and too far; and it seems to be blurred, and I ask myself why write at all? seeing I shall never recapture what you have by your side this minute. I should like to write a very subtle work on the proper writing of lives. (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf* 325)

Briggs notes that “it was during the 1880s and 1890s, the very years when [Leslie] Stephen was working on his *Dictionary* that modern biography was born” (26). Marcus claims that Woolf “appears to have coined the term ‘the new biography’ in describing experiments in biography in the 1910s and 1920s – in particular, those of her contemporaries Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson” (91). Marcus describes “the failure of Victorian biography” as having dominated “discussions of the new biography” (90). She also notes the influence of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, with its “satirical approach to historical figures and its emphasis on biography as an art, in which the selection of ‘facts’ is all-important”, as well as how “its critique of Victorian values, institutions and ‘personalities’ is inseparable from its critique of nineteenth-century biographi*cal discourse” (91). There was also Nicolson's *Some People*, a “play with biography and autobiography, [and] real and imaginary portraits” (Marcus 91), which Woolf describes in her essay “The New Biography” (NB):

For here [Nicolson] has devised a method of writing about people and about himself as though they were at once real and imaginary. He has succeeded remarkably, if not entirely, in making the best of both worlds. *Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction. (189)

The techniques employed by both these writers relate to what Woolf was aiming for in her experiments with biography. Lee notes that, for Woolf, “the crucial problem in the biographies that her generation [...] inherited [was] the tug between fact and fiction and the difficulty of getting to the ‘soul’” (10). This “difficulty” is also described by Lee as getting “at the essence of personality” (8), or what Herta Newman refers to as the “essence of

character” (87), and the two facets of the “crucial problem” Woolf mentions form the basis of my investigation into her various examinations of, and attempts at, life-writing.

Briggs observes Woolf’s various experiments with life-writing throughout her career, making particular mention of her “subtle essays on ‘The New Biography’ (1927) and ‘The Art of Biography’” (1940). The temporal situation of these two essays might seem surprisingly late given how Woolf’s earliest writings were already “preoccupied with the problems” (25) posed by biography. Nevertheless, both works are pertinent in their address of Victorian and modern biography, and the “cultural shift between the nature” (26) of the two. In fact, when placed alongside one another, these two essays read as a culmination of Woolf’s sustained consideration of a literary genre that had fascinated her since an early age and to which she refers in almost all of her novels. Both essays feature critiques by Woolf of Victorian trends in biography. She notes in “The Art of Biography” (AB) that “the Victorian age was rich in remarkable figures [,] many of whom had been grossly deformed by the effigies that had been plastered over them” (121). This recalls “The New Biography”, in which Woolf explains how “the Victorian biographer was dominated by the idea of goodness” and how “the Victorian worthies were presented” as “noble, upright, chaste, [and] severe” (188). Such depictions countered the burgeoning focus on personality in biography, whose origins Woolf ascribes to James Boswell, the eighteenth-century biographer responsible for depicting the life of Samuel Johnson. It was due to his endeavours, according to Woolf, that biographers were slowly being dissuaded from the idea “that life [consisted] in actions only or in works” and were realising more how life “[consisted] in personality” (NB 187). It was the Victorian biographers, however, who “hampered and distorted” the “personality which Boswell’s genius set free” (NB 188), due to their focus on “the idea of goodness”. “Personality” informs Woolf’s biographical vision, but she problematizes its cohesion within a biographical text in various ways. In “The New Biography” she states,

On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality.
And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity
and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility
and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into
one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff
one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the
most part failed to solve it. (186)

The problem with the “truthful transmission of personality” (Sidney Lee qtd. in Woolf, NB 186) in biography is the faulty assumption that simply relaying facts will assist in this “truthful transmission”. Ironically, it is Sir Sidney Lee himself (Leslie Stephen’s co-editor of the *DB*) who is most at fault, in Woolf’s view, by failing “to choose truths which transmit personality” (186) in his lives of Shakespeare and Edward of Seventh. Both, according to Woolf, are respectively “dull” and “unreadable” (186) as a result of this failure. Part of Woolf’s particular methodology for success in this “transmission” reads thus:

For in order that the light of personality may shine through,
facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others
shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity.
(NB 187)

What makes biography “the most restricted of all the arts” (AB 120) is the condition “imposed” by the genre, which states that it “must be based on fact”, specifically fact “that can be verified by other people beside the artist” (123). Woolf creates a dichotomy between biographers and proponents of fiction, specifically novelists, with regard to the depiction of character in another essay, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1924). Her claim herein is that “novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes” (97). Biographers form part of “the rest of the world”, since their works are constrained more by the mandatory attention they must pay to truthful, factual and accurate details. Novelists “go a step further”, feeling

that there is something permanently interesting in character in
itself. When all the practical business of life has been
discharged, there is something about people which continues to
seem to them of overwhelming importance in spite of the fact
that it has no bearing whatever upon their happiness, comfort, or
income. (97)

The unfairness in making the distinction between biography and fiction is exacerbated by the suggestion that no historian or biographer can be as creative or have as much access to the character or psychology of his or her subject as a novelist. The latter has insight into the mind of the character he or she creates, a notion Woolf expands upon in “The Art of Biography” when she says, “the invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only—the artist himself” (124). The biographer, on the other hand, might not be

so fortunate, writing about his or her subject from an outward perspective with no clear idea of that person's psychology. As a consequence of this apparent distinction, there can (apparently) be no blur between factual and fictional writing; a clear line separates the two instead.

Not knowing the subject personally is not the only problem faced by the biographer. There is also the questionable credibility of the aforementioned "other people" (AB 123). Woolf makes a distinction between "biography and fiction" in this regard:

One is made with the help of friends, of facts; the other is created without any restrictions save those that the artist, for reasons that seem good to him, chooses to obey. That is a distinction; and there is good reason to think that in the past biographers have found it not only a distinction but a very cruel distinction. (120)

In order to exemplify the problems with consulting these "friends" of the biographer's subject, Woolf creates a hypothetical scenario in which they are held accountable for the (specifically Victorian) biographer having to distort the information he has on his subject in order to create a wholly positive image of him:

The widow and the friends were hard taskmasters. Suppose, for example, that the man of genius was immoral, ill-tempered and threw the boots at the maid's head. The widow would say, "Still I loved him – he was the father of my children; and the public, who love his books, must on no account be disillusioned. Cover up; omit." The biographer obeyed. And thus the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street—effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin. (120)

This immediately recalls Glendinning's mention of the branch of biographical writing that constitutes "the memorialising of distinguished men" and the involvement of "old friends and family members" (BCG 64). The reason, I feel, that Woolf characterises the aforementioned "distinction" as "cruel" (AB 120), is that it is unfair to biographers themselves. Woolf takes responsibility away from the biographer, suggesting that biographical conventions in the Victorian era were determined more by those who would receive their work. Not only were biographers restrained by the need to tell the truth in their works, and were all the more limited by having to leave out some information, they were obliged, out of the wishes of their

subjects' friends, family members, colleagues and acquaintances, to present a spotless portrait of that person. This is why Woolf refers to the changes in biographical convention after the turn of the century as "the biographer" winning "a measure of freedom" (121). Woolf notes that one of the changes which "came over biography" in "the twentieth century" (NB 188) was that "the author's relation to his¹ subject" (189) was different. She elaborates:

He [the biographer] is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal. In any case, he preserves his freedom and his right to independent judgment. Moreover, he does not think himself constrained to follow every step of the way. Raised upon a little eminence which his independence has made for him, he sees his object spread about him. He chooses; he synthesises; in short he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist. (NB 189)

Woolf develops this idea of the biographer as "an artist" in "The Art of Biography", first asking,

Could not biography produce something of the intensity of poetry, something of the excitement of drama, and yet keep also the peculiar virtue that belongs to fact—its suggestive reality, its own proper creativeness? (122)

Woolf clearly advocates the biographer's devotion to fact coupled with the artistry and creativity exhibited by proponents of fiction. Woolf uses the example of Harold Nicolson once again to illustrate "that one can use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life" and "that a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively" (NB 191). It is ultimately the biographer's task to combine the "truth of fact and truth of fiction" (NB 191-192).

This thesis demonstrates how Woolf, in a selection of her novels, addresses and employs the method of combining fact and fiction in order to attempt to approach "the essence of personality" more closely. The three essays discussed in this introductory chapter form the basis of my exploration into Woolf's experimentation with biographical writing. Many of Woolf's works have been considered in terms of biography and autobiography, as evidenced by Jane de Gay's essay "'Lives Together': Literary and Spiritual Autobiographies

¹ The issue of Woolf's frequent use of male gender pronouns when discussing hypothetical writers/authors/biographers etc. will be discussed later in this thesis (see p76).

in *The Waves*”, and Julia Briggs’s statement that in *Night and Day* “fiction and biography are used to mirror one another” (25). Aside from this comment, Briggs mentions *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* as “forms of imaginative life-writing, that drew on biographical writing”, *The Waves* and *The Years* as epitomising “the lives of individuals outside and inside history”, and *Orlando* and *Flush* as revising “the traditional concept of biography” (39).

There is still, however, a need for a more comprehensive and unified account of the biographical and autobiographical nature of Woolf’s writing. There are various publications, such as those by Lee, Alice van Buren Kelley and Avrom Fleishman, in which most or all of Woolf’s works are analysed side by side, but in each of these works life-writing is not substantially considered. In *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, Hermione Lee, a proponent of biographical writing and criticism, states at the outset that she “does not deal” with Woolf “as a biographer” (1). Here the idea of Woolf as a biographer is suggested, only to be excluded.

What seems to be missing from the corpus of Woolfian scholarship is an attempt to situate Woolf’s works against each other within the fields of biography and autobiography and trace the ways in which Woolf approaches these genres throughout her career. What is notable about Woolf’s *oeuvre* is that all her works are linked together by a variety of concerns, thus providing a more than substantial basis for investigation into any one of them. Her various concerns with the position of women in society and literature, for example, ties into her interest in life-writing. Anna Snaith mentions how Woolf “knew how important it was for women to write themselves into the public world, whether fictionally, biographically or autobiographically” (45). Woolf’s extended essay *A Room of One’s Own* (AROO) lucidly expresses the societal expectations and literary representation of women, which often reflect one another, as well the conflict and possible balance between male and female patterns of thinking. Woolf’s idea of “the androgynous mind” (128) , for example, is particularly applicable to each of the three novels I discuss, as the unification of male and female methods of thought is reflective of the fusion of fact and fiction Woolf envisions in life-writing. My analysis is solely devoted, therefore, to Woolf’s position within and approach to the genre of life-writing, so no further theoretical or critical framework has been deemed necessary to bolster my research. When analysing *To the Lighthouse*, I will discuss, in some detail, its status as an autobiographical novel by referring to Roy Pascal’s commentary on this particular genre. I feel this is important considering the tradition of the autobiographical novel during the Modernist era. This discussion will be brief, however, as my main aim is to argue how and why the novel is so pertinent within the context of Woolf’s life and works. I

will of course look at the short memoirs, letters and diary entries written by Woolf, as well as biographical works by Hermione Lee, Victoria Glendinning and Michael L. Stevens, these last two having written works on the life of Vita Sackville-West, in order to provide sources for some of Woolf's fictional material.

The first work I will discuss is Woolf's debut novel, *The Voyage Out* (TVO). It is in this text that Woolf actually opens up a discussion, which she extends throughout her *oeuvre*, on the difficulty of being a biographer of others and of oneself. Its protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, seeks to fashion an identity for herself that is separate from the prescribed conventions she encounters in both society and literature. Rachel gradually becomes aware of how to document others by employing a fusion of basic fact and various aspects of fiction. In my analysis I will refer to Alice van Buren Kelley's idea of connecting "fact to vision" (8), the latter signifying values such as perception or intuition, which necessarily pertain to fiction. Rachel tries, and ultimately fails, to achieve this fusion. Her oscillation between social rebellion and conformity as an Edwardian woman is reflective of her rebellion and conformity as a female character, thus signifying the novel's metafictional nature. Self-reflexivity is also ubiquitous in the second novel I will analyse, *Orlando* (O), which is presented very self-consciously as a traditional Victorian biography depicting the life of Woolf's friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West. This depiction is, however, indisputably fantastical given the title character's change of sex halfway through the novel and his/her longevity over 400 years. *Orlando* is fundamental to this thesis, as Woolf subtly inserts ideas pertaining to her concept of the 'new' biography into the novel in order to critique the representation of identity and the recounting of personal experience in Victorian biography as well as other types of historical record. Marcus notes how "Woolf's experiments with biography place [...] gender identities and boundaries at risk, radically disrupting the concept of the life-course" (91) and Orlando's transformation serves as an explicit means for Woolf to indicate the difficulty in capturing "the essence of personality". Orlando's sexuality is as ambivalent as his/her personality, and the "variety of selves" (213) which constitute his character end up obscuring that essence, a development that extends to the third novel I consider, *To the Lighthouse* (TTL). In this work, the painter Lily Briscoe attempts to capture the personality of the admired Mrs Ramsay in an abstract artwork, and Woolf's presentation of this attempt is another means by which she problematizes the artistic depiction of character or personality. What makes this novel different, however, is that it is *autobiographical*, and in analysing it I will at first place it within the context of autobiographical fiction to show how it can be classified as such. My

main objective in this chapter, however, is to work with the intricacies of the text in order to discover how Woolf achieves “enriching mutuality” (Newman 83) between the autobiographical and fictional strains of its narrative. In order to assess the factual background of *To the Lighthouse* I will consult Woolf’s two unfinished memoirs, “Reminiscences” (R) and “A Sketch of the Past” (SP), the first written at the beginning of her literary career, and the second towards its end. LuAnn McCracken describes both works as attempts by Woolf to construct “an autobiographical retelling of her childhood” (59), while Gail B. Griffin notes how they “tell the same tale, albeit quite differently” (109). While it might seem problematic to use the latter memoir in my analysis, since it was published after *To the Lighthouse*, the fact that it is based on memory and actually contains details of Woolf’s psychological experiences while writing *To the Lighthouse*, proves its usefulness as a secondary text. Woolf uses memory to inform the content of works such as *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*, and her experimentation with historical documentation evolves steadily throughout her career. The foremost autobiographical function of *To the Lighthouse* rests within Lily’s depiction of Mrs Ramsay which, according to Madeline Moore, is reflective of Woolf attempting to exorcise “her love-hate feelings for her mother” (82). These two corresponding artistic endeavours illustrate the metafictional nature of *To the Lighthouse*. I will also demonstrate how Woolf pays tribute to her father in the novel and how the appearance of Cam Ramsay, also representative of Woolf herself, forms part of that tribute. Woolf actually transposes various traumatic events in her own life to a different time period and fictionalises them in order to depict human experience and hardship in a more generalised manner. What Woolf achieves in *To the Lighthouse* by combining autobiography and fiction is a sense of catharsis for both her and the reader. In addition, the various dynamics between male and female characters in *To the Lighthouse* evince her preoccupation with the clash between ascribed patterns of male and female thinking that is ubiquitous throughout her *oeuvre*. What Woolf seems to demonstrate in her novels is that while a combination of fact and fiction is useful in more closely approaching “the essence of personality”, it is still not possible to capture that essence fully. As we shall see, personality is more easily definable as an amalgamation of fluid features constituting character.

Chapter One-

Becoming Auto/biographical: Fashioning Identities and Balancing Fact with Vision in

The Voyage Out

Introduction

The efforts of *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse* to convey a cohesive unification of fact and fiction have perhaps proven more successful than Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*. It is thought to be "a failure" by those "critics" who "implicitly or explicitly assume" (McCracken 68) that it reflects Woolf's inability to exorcise "her obsessive love-hate feelings for her mother" (Moore 82). Many take the stance that the novel is a partial autobiography which, according to McCracken, "reflects, among other things", Woolf's attempt to represent and "re-present" her "separation from her mother" (59). McCracken states that through the novel's "'safer' fictional medium" Woolf "distances herself from her subject matter" and "reconnects her self to the figure of her mother through the imaginative projection of Rachel Vinrace" (60). It is Rachel's eventual death which, according to McCracken, "embodies both Woolf's ambivalent need for the past presided over by the mother and her wish to break from it" (60). *The Voyage Out* is ultimately, according to Moore, "the novel in which Woolf is least able to transform her own material" (82); a clear reference to the novel's apparent inability to transpose the facts of Woolf's life into a fictional narrative. My purpose in analysing *The Voyage Out* is to navigate away from these aforementioned interpretations. My contention is that the work is primarily a fiction that deals with notions of identity, and subtly conveys Woolf's attempts at creating literature that not only incorporates ideas around the topic of life-writing, but also focuses on its cohesive fusion with fiction, imagination and intuition. Erica Wagner suggests multiple and intertwining interpretations one can place upon the novel under the topic of life-writing:

It is hard to avoid reading *The Voyage Out* biographically—looking not so much for clues to the author's life, but for clues to one's own. The novel's title makes it a paradigm for every first fiction, and by extension a metaphor for the setting-off into life: particularly if that life is the life of a writer. (ix)

One autobiographical marker is perhaps this subtle titular reference to marking Woolf's embarkation as a writer. In fact, *The Voyage Out* seems to pre-empt the rest of Woolf's

oeuvre in that it reveals, as Avrom Fleishman notes, “a number of themes that make her fiction distinctive and important” (2). Jean Guiguet seconds this claim when stating that “the essence of this first novel, what it is seeking for, and what it trying to express, is what Virginia Woolf seeks and tries to express in each of her books” (qtd. in Kelley 7). Wagner has also suggested in the above excerpt a broader biographical agenda attempted by *The Voyage Out*. In fact, her mention of looking “for clues” to “one’s own” (ix) life is pertinent when considering the novel’s thematic concerns. *The Voyage Out* incorporates the concept of progressively writing *one’s own* biography, deciding what aspects of oneself one might choose to expose, and fashioning one’s own identity amidst a set of norms that have been laid down, albeit unofficially, by society. Avrom Fleishman describes how *The Voyage Out* “resembles a conventional novel in being largely taken up with personal relations among the British middle class” (1). Frances Spalding notes how the novel “churns with protest, while staying safely within the Victorian narrative tradition in its use of plot, incident and the development of character” (xv), while Hermione Lee explains, in *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (NVW), how “it is unsparingly critical of the restrictions of freedom and truth” that Woolf “associated with Victorianism” (31). It is with interpretations such as these in mind that we can begin scrutinising the novel’s biographical agenda, since the focus therein is on the protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, and her attempt to create a personal identity amidst the conventions and traditions alluded to.

The idea of unifying fact and fiction becomes apparent in *The Voyage Out* when we consider that Rachel’s “personal growth” is “defined in terms of the relationship of fact to vision” (Kelley 8). Kelley discusses this relationship in the introduction to the book, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision*, saying that

for Virginia Woolf the world of fact is the world of physical isolation and limitation; the world of vision is the spiritual world of unity and pattern. But neither world can exist without the other if any order or meaning is to be discovered in life. Fact needs vision to help it transcend the limits of objective, physical truth. Vision needs fact as the solid base from which to leap into unity. (4-5)

Vision is aligned, therefore, with the abstract, and concepts such as perception or intuition, which are fundamental in the process of creating a fictional narrative. Kelley often speaks, however, about vision as a goal or a destination. She mentions how Rachel is on a “path to

vision” and how she “needs the sharpness of fact to carve a definite self from her yet unformed being before she can experience the vision in full intensity” (14). These statements do imply a balance of fact with vision, but also suggest that Rachel’s ultimate goal in the novel is a visionary experience. I, however, am using Kelley’s argument to establish that it is the effective balance of fact and vision that constitutes Rachel’s ultimate goal. It is an outlook characterised by the combination of vision with empirical fact that Rachel must master in order to complete her first ‘voyage’ into society successfully. Such a process is similar to Woolf’s own attempts in *The Voyage Out*, and throughout her career, to master this fusion.

Voyages “out” and voyages “in”: Rachel’s rebellious embarkation

At the outset of the novel, Rachel is aboard the *Euphrosyne*, the ship that will eventually take her to the fictitious port of Santa Marina in South America, and is amongst family. She is scrutinised within the first few pages by her aunt, Helen Ambrose, who concludes that Rachel is “an unlicked girl” (16), and observes that she is “perhaps too still for a hostess” (10). The latter reflection implies that there is an expectation that Miss Vinrace should fulfil a conventional role allocated to women in Edwardian society. Rachel’s father, Willoughby, is also present. He claims to “expect great things” (14) of his daughter, while inwardly judging her for not meeting his expectations:

Much as Willoughby would doubtless have liked his daughter to praise him she did not; her eyes were unreflecting as water, her fingers still toying with the fossilised fish, her mind absent. (15)

The first chapter ends on a surprisingly humorous note, when Helen scrutinises Rachel one last time before retiring:

At the door she glanced back instinctively at Rachel, expecting that as two of the same sex they would leave the room together. Rachel rose, looked vaguely into Helen’s face, and remarked with her slight stammer, “I’m going out to t-t-triumph in the wind.”

Mrs. Ambrose’s worst suspicions were confirmed; she went down the passage lurching from side to side, and fending off the wall now with her right arm, now with her left; at each lurch she exclaimed emphatically, “Damn!” (17)

This exclamation can equally be interpreted as a reaction to Rachel's response as well as the turbulence on the boat. There is a definite implication in Rachel's reply that she would rather jettison the confinement of Edwardian familial and societal norms for a freer yet more precarious environment, suggested by the "wind". Such a stance would appear audacious and improper to Helen, but her concern is likely motivated by Rachel's questionable ability to match up to her apparent bravado, particularly given her naiveté, hinted at by the reflections of her father and aunt, and timidity, suggested by her stammer. Much is expected of Rachel within the cosy confines of the vessel that carries her to the next stage of her journey, though these expectations are couched within the "microcosm of the upper-middle-class conventional English way of life which has ensured her ignorance and her inexperience" (Lee, *NVW* 34). Linden Peach notes that "women in Victorian and Edwardian Britain usually had to endure a static domestic situation" (48) and that "while for men there were 'voyages out', for women there were only 'voyages in' – to marriage and domesticity" (41). Rachel wishes to create a life of her own during the voyage and the stay in Santa Marina rather than simply fulfilling the various requirements laid out for her at its beginning.

Portraiture, reflection and personal description as auto/biography

The fashioning of identities is ubiquitous in *The Voyage Out*, with characters constructing images of themselves or of others, no doubt an implicit commentary on the ubiquity of biography in everyday life. An early instance of the latter kind of construction features temporary passengers Richard and Clarissa Dalloway, the latter destined to appear again in Woolf's *oeuvre* as one of her greatest heroines, with her husband as a supporting character. The scene involves Rachel's father "sketching" for them "the people they [are] to meet" (38). The implication is that the Dalloways are offered rough images of their fellow passengers, perhaps from which they can form some kind of opinion. It remains only for these strangers to attempt to change those opinions with images they present of themselves, usually by the process of becoming "autobiographical" (20). A pertinent moment later in the novel is when St. John Hirst, the friend of Rachel's eventual fiancé Terence Hewet, proposes that "each member" of his party "gives a short biographical sketch of himself or herself", stipulating that they "keep to the facts" (156). Such a task would no doubt be undertaken with a degree of self-consciousness, a factor which might influence the degree of veracity with which "each member" reveals facts about his or her self. A person's self-consciousness at being viewed while in a particular state is exemplified earlier in *The Voyage Out* when Hughling Elliot,

another visitor to Santa Marina, wonders if there is “anything more dreadful” than “being seen when one isn’t conscious of it” since “one feels sure one has been caught doing something ridiculous”, such as “looking at one’s tongue in a hansom” (144). His interlocutor, one Mrs. Thornbury, notes in reply that “those little looking-glasses in hansoms have a fascination of their own” since “one’s features look so different when one can only see a bit of them” (144). Her statement echoes a scene in *Orlando* in which Elizabeth I smashes a mirror reflecting the upsetting image of Orlando frolicking with another woman. Both moments feature a person being presented with a temporarily framed image that leaves a particular impression on him or her. In the case of Mrs. Thornbury’s hypothetical scenario involving hansom cab mirrors, the impression might lead to self-consciousness and therefore a possible wish to amend the image held.

The self-conscious reaction to and/or formulation of one’s own image recurs elsewhere in Woolf’s *oeuvre*, specifically *The Years*. A scene in this novel involves a gathering of upper-class women after a party. There are two pertinent conversations herein, the first of which exemplifies a character’s self-consciousness when faced with an inaccurate image of herself:

“How I love that picture of you, Kitty!” said Mrs Aislabie, looking up at the portrait of Lady Lasswade as a young woman. Her hair had been very red in those days; she was toying with a basket of roses. Fiery, but tender, she looked, emerging from a cloud of white muslin.
Kitty glanced at it and then turned away.
“One never likes one’s own picture,” she said
“But it’s the image of you!” said another lady.
“Not now,” said Kitty, laughing off the compliment rather awkwardly. (224)

The second conversation involves a guest offering a much-edited version of her grandmother’s life story tailored to the sensibilities of her particular audience. The character is referred to as “Old Aunt Warburton” (226) and the guest who constitutes her audience is the young and somewhat naïve Ann Hillier:

And then the old lady, with beautiful breeding that simulated at least human charity, flattered the girl, likening her to her grandmother, a famous beauty.
“How I should love to have known her!” Ann exclaimed.
“Do tell me—what was she like?”

The old lady began making a selection from her memoirs; it was only a selection; an edition with asterisks; for it was a story that could hardly be told to a girl in white satin.
(227)

That Aunt Warburton “[dislikes] young girls” (227) certainly informs the image she has of Ann, yet she carries on the interlocation for the sake of propriety. In doing so she not only offers an inaccurate representation of her grandmother to her listener, but no doubt an inaccurate representation of herself as well. Both instances from the aforementioned scene reflect how contingent representation is on the perceptions of others.

There is a moment in *The Voyage Out* when Helen reacts to the younger and more naïve Rachel in much the same way, when the latter offers a description of her father’s close friend William Pepper:

“It’s odd that every one should be an old friend of Mr Pepper’s,” Rachel started nervously, for the situation was difficult, the room cold, and Helen curiously silent.

“I suppose you take him for granted?” said her aunt.

“He’s like this,” said Rachel, lighting on a fossilised fish in a basin, and displaying it.

“I expect you’re too severe,” Helen remarked.

Rachel immediately tried to qualify what she had said against her belief.

“I don’t really know him,” she said, and took refuge to facts, believing that elderly people really like them better than feelings. She produced what she knew of William Pepper. She told Helen that he always called on Sundays when they were at home; he knew about a great many things—about mathematics, history, Greek, zoology, economics, and the Icelandic sagas. He had turned Persian poetry into English prose, and English prose into Greek iambics; he was an authority upon coins; and—one other thing—oh yes, she thought it was vehicular traffic.

He was here either to get things out of the sea, or to write upon the probable course of Odysseus, for Greek after all was his hobby.

“I’ve got all his pamphlets,” she said. “Little pamphlets. Little yellow books.” It did not appear that she had read them.

“Has he ever been in love?” asked Helen, who had chosen a seat.

“His heart’s a piece of shoe leather,” Rachel declared, dropping the fish. But when questioned she had to own that she had never asked him.

“I shall ask him,” said Helen. (12-13)

Rachel's blend of opinion, fact, misinformation and speculation constitutes the first 'biography' of Mr Pepper offered to both Helen and the reader. The fact that it is so flawed bespeaks Woolf's intentions to problematize biography for her readers. Like Helen, we are also critics of Rachel's analysis. The reason Helen's reaction to Rachel mirrors Lady Warburton's to Ann in *The Years* is that both young women are perceived to be naïve, a flaw which prevents them from being taken seriously in terms of the sharing of information. Helen's eventual resolution to "ask" (13) Mr Pepper about a facet of his character is indicative, perhaps, of a wish to move from this unreliable biography to Mr Pepper's own autobiography, which he offers quite literally, at least according to the narrator. At the beginning of Chapter 2 his "meditations" take him "through a considerable stretch of autobiography" (19) in front of his listeners, including Helen. A moment later he is said to become "autobiographical" (20), doing so in reasonable detail so as to answer Helen's question:

He had not married himself for the sufficient reason that he had never met a woman who commanded his respect. Condemned to pass the susceptible years of youth in a railway station in Bombay, he had seen only coloured women, military women, official women; and his ideal was a woman who could read Greek, if not Persian, was irreproachably fair in the face, and able to understand the small things he let fall while undressing. As it was he had contracted habits of which he was not in the least ashamed. Certain odd minutes every day went to learning things by heart; he never took a ticket without noting the number; he devoted January to Petronius, February to Catullus; March to the Etruscan vases perhaps; anyhow he had done good work in India, and there was nothing to regret in his life except the fundamental defects which no wise man regrets, when the present is still his. So concluding he looked up suddenly and smiled. (20)

Mr Pepper has improved upon Rachel's rough biographical draft. The moment attests to the metafictional quality of Woolf's work, since a character has offered his autobiography not only to his audience within the narrative, but to Woolf's readers as well, so that we may ascertain the differences that exist between the two genres with which Woolf is experimenting. That being said, this 'autobiography' is not rendered in Mr Pepper's own words, and reads more like a biographical description, thus being almost as problematic as Rachel's earlier analysis. In fact, the construction of the above passage sets up a comparison

between the levels of distance created by autobiography and biography. The former genre brings the reader closer to the subject in question (in this case Mr Pepper) but biographical description creates a greater distance.

“Astonishing treasures”: the first glimpses of Richard Dalloway

A notable facet of Rachel’s progress as a character is her reception and interpretation of other people. In a sense, she is a biographer of the people who surround her, and as the novel progresses her ideas of people change from the superficial or one-sided to the ambivalent and nuanced. We have already had glimpses of her naïveté, and descriptions of her history, so fundamental to any biography, reveal a life of shelter and inexperience. At the end of Chapter 2 Rachel resolves to

let these odd men and women—her aunts, the Hunts, Ridley, Helen, Mr. Pepper, and the rest—be symbols,—featureless but dignified, symbols of age of youth, of motherhood, of learning, and beautiful often as people upon the stage are beautiful. (32)

This appears to be quite a limited and self-serving method of perceiving the world. It is as if Rachel is ignoring the humanness of each person she encounters, rather choosing to view him or her reductively as representing one specific facet of human experience. To her, these people are unchanging, mere blueprints from which she feels she can attain some kind of understanding of the world. It is only after her various interactions with Richard Dalloway that this perception changes. In the opening pages of Chapter 4 he has a notable effect on Rachel, who is “curiously conscious of his presence and appearance” (54). The conversation that follows is about the loss of pets, during which Richard’s attitude to the matter shifts from blunt and somewhat sardonic to sentimental and nostalgic. In short, he proves he is not one-sided, and Rachel must realise this, given the following reaction:

Rachel had other questions on the tip of her tongue; or rather one enormous question, which she did not in the least know how to put into words. The talk appeared too airy to admit of it.

“Please tell me—everything.” That was what she wanted to say. He had drawn apart one little chink and showed astonishing treasures. It seemed to her incredible that a man like that should be willing to talk to her. He had sisters and pets, and once lived in the country. She stirred her tea round and round; the bubbles which swam and clustered in the cup seemed to her like the union of their minds. (55-56)

This documentation of Richard is exactly the kind that Woolf would recommend. He is not being glorified like the subject of traditional Victorian biography, whose proponents were “dominated by the idea of goodness”, and whose subjects were often presented as “noble, upright, chaste, [or] severe” (Woolf, NB 188). In addition he is not represented as a collection of mere facts, as in a work akin to the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The “astonishing treasures” Rachel sees in Richard refer to “those truths which transmit [Richard’s] personality” (ibid. 186), some of them agreeable, some questionable, but all of them constituting Richard’s ambivalent character, which both Rachel *and* the reader have been shown. Of course, this only corresponds to part of Woolf’s concept of the new biographer, since it is the emphasis on personality that is addressed, and not necessarily the compatibility of the “truth of fact” (191) and the “truth of fiction” (192).

The importance of encapsulating a subject’s personality is highlighted in a socio-politically themed conversation between Rachel and Richard, which also reveals the latter’s perception of the function of human beings. The debate exemplifies the feminist commentary Woolf incorporates within *The Voyage Out*, which I will address independently, but will for now discuss within the broad topic of human identity. Rachel considers, “an old widow in her room, somewhere, let us suppose in the suburbs of Leeds” (66), and explains to Richard

In London you’re spending your life, talking, writing things, getting bills through, missing what seems natural. The result of it all is that she goes to her cupboard and finds a little more tea, a few lumps of sugar, or a little less tea and a newspaper. Widows all over the country do this. Still, there’s the mind of the widow—the affections; those you leave untouched. But you waste your own. (66)

While Rachel does consider the ubiquity and similarity of old widows’ experiences “all over the country”, her mention of the hypothetical widow’s “affections” recalls “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”.¹ Woolf states herein that the biographer and the novelist are different due to the unceasing attention paid by the novelist to a person’s character even “when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes” (97). A person’s character is no doubt partly comprised by his or her “affections”, so Rachel is somewhat taking the side of the novelist in Woolf’s essay by emphasising those of the widow. Richard’s apparent lack of consideration

¹ See p. 4.

of character puts him on the side of the traditional Victorian biographer, as does his opinion that “a human being is not a set of compartments, but an organism” (66) with the “exalted aim” of being “the citizen of the Empire” (67). He embellishes:

Look at it this way, Miss Vinrace; conceive the state as a complicated machine; we citizens are parts of that machine; some fulfil more important duties; others (perhaps I am one of them) serve only to connect some obscure parts of the mechanism, concealed from the public eye. Yet if the meanest screw fails in its task, the proper working of the whole is imperilled. (67)

Kelley describes Richard as “a man who stands solidly for fact and action” (14) and against the “intuition” (15) that Rachel stands for. Richard does not seem to see anything beyond a person’s practical and functional purpose in society, while Rachel wishes to venture beyond this, resulting in her unspoken disagreement with her interlocutor:

It was impossible to combine the image of a lean black widow, gazing out of her window, and longing for someone to talk to, with the image of a vast machine, such as one sees at South Kensington, thumping, thumping, thumping. The communication had been a failure. (67)

The disparity between their views seems irrevocable. Woolf offers a situation in which a pragmatic approach to human life cannot seem to mix with a more insightful one. What is interesting is that she attempts in the rest of her *oeuvre* to combine these two approaches. Works such as *Orlando* and the *To the Lighthouse*, in which Woolf does combine practical biography with insightful fiction, seem like a response to this situation, and a way of saying that such a fusion can be achieved. A short while after the conversation discussed above, Richard and Rachel speak about the relaying of one’s own life story:

“D’you know, Miss Vinrace, you’ve made me think? How little, after all, one can tell anybody about one’s life! Here I sit; there you sit; both, I doubt not, chock-full of the most interesting experiences, ideas, emotions; yet how to communicate? I’ve told you what every second person you meet might tell you.”
“I don’t think so,” she said. “It’s the way of saying things, isn’t it, not the things?” (69)

This very conversation touches on one of Woolf's major preoccupations, i.e. the difficulty in properly, or correctly, documenting a person's life. The kind of documentation Richard refers to here is mundane, and matter-of-fact, while Rachel hints at a better method of relaying one's own life experiences; a method that strays away from the mere recollection of facts.

The "education of Rachel": Richard's kiss and Rachel's guides

The above conversation relates to the moment when St. John Hirst asks that those around him offer "short biographical [sketches]" of themselves, since for them to "keep to the facts" (156) is actually a request for them to limit the information they could share. It is Helen who seems to challenge St. John by initiating a discussion on the divulging of information that is personal yet not so readily extractable:

"That's all very interesting," said Helen after a pause.
"But of course we've left out the only questions that matter. For instance, are we Christians?"

"I am not," "I am not," both the young men replied.

"I am," Rachel stated.

"You believe in a personal God?" Hirst demanded, turning round and fixing her with his eyeglasses."

"I believe—I believe," Rachel stammered, "I believe there are things we don't know about, and the world might change in a minute and anything appear."

At this Helen laughed outright. "Nonsense," she said. "You're not a Christian. You've never thought what you are.—And there are lots of other questions," she continued, "though perhaps we can't ask them yet." Although they had talked so freely they were all uncomfortably conscious that they really knew nothing about each other.

"The important questions," Hewet pondered, "the really interesting ones. I doubt that one does ever ask them."

Rachel, who was slow to accept the fact that only a very few things can be said even by people who know each other well, insisted on knowing what he meant.

"Whether we've ever been in love?" she enquired. "Is that the kind of question you mean?"

And Helen laughed at her, benignantly strewing her with handfuls of the long tasselled grass, for she was so brave and so foolish. (157-158)

Terence and Helen seem to be the two characters in *The Voyage Out* most fundamental to Rachel's enlightenment. The above conversation suggests that they are both attuned to the more inscrutable side of human existence. Lee states that Terence "anticipates the ways in

which Virginia Woolf wanted fiction to reflect the nature of existence” (NVW 46). He reveals this in his early contentions that “all we see of each other is a speck, like a wick in the middle of that flame” (117-118), that “the flame goes about with us everywhere”, and that “it’s not ourselves exactly, but what we feel” (118). He and Helen act as guides for Rachel to grow more aware of it as well, the latter revealing herself as an educated and experienced figure who can steer Rachel away from her naïve and limited view of the world to one that is more insightful. A notable moment in *The Voyage Out* is when Richard suddenly and passionately kisses Rachel on deck. The effects of this embrace on Rachel are varied. At first, “life” seems to her “to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed at” (78), an indication that experience is opening up for her and becoming more dimensional in the same way that Richard draws apart “one little chink” earlier in the novel and reveals “astonishing treasures” (56) that partly comprise his personality. A while afterwards, however, the psychological effects of the kiss are more sinister:

Still and cold as death she lay, not daring to move, until she broke the agony by tossing herself across the bed, and woke crying “Oh!”

Light showed her the familiar things: her clothes, fallen off the chair; the water jug gleaming white; but the horror did not go at once. She felt herself pursued, so that she got up and actually locked her door. A voice moaned for her; eyes desired her. All night long barbarian men harassed the ship; they came scuffling down the passages, and stopped to snuffle at her door. She could not sleep again. (79-80)

The physical descriptions in this passage suggest Rachel’s movement between that which is already visible and therefore familiar to her and that which is unknown to her. So great is her naïveté that her earlier encounter with Richard has catalysed wildly over-exaggerated ideas of male concupiscence. She seems not only jarred by the character of one man, but wary of the characters of all men. Upon Helen hearing about the kiss, she inwardly reacts as follows:

Helen could hardly restrain herself from saying out loud what she thought of a man who brought up his daughter so that at the age of twenty-four she scarcely knew that men desired women and was terrified by a kiss. (84)

Instead of chastising or scaring Rachel, Helen resolves to comfort her, advising her not be “frightened” since attention from men is “the most natural thing in the world” (84) but her

niece remains “inattentive” (85), going so far as to raise the topic of prostitution for a brief moment:

“Tell me,” she said suddenly, “what are those women in Piccadilly?”

“In Piccadilly? They are prostituted,” said Helen.

“It is terrifying—it is disgusting,” Rachel asserted, as if she included Helen in the hatred. (85)

Regarding this conversation, Moore states, “Rachel magnifies the experience for she has not acquired that social balance which is a characteristic of the mature person” (90). Rachel’s paranoid assumption mirrors her feelings of being “pursued” (80) on the night of the incident. Perhaps she feels that if a married man and single younger woman embrace then he is lustful and she is loose, and that there is no discrepancy amongst people who act as she and Richard have, or variation in the psychology behind these actions. Rachel lacks the insight and experience to comprehend fully what being kissed might entail, and she documents it mentally in terms of stereotypes. Hermione Lee states that “since she has only been once kissed, by the ‘pompous and sentimental’ Richard Dalloway, we are allowed to laugh at her exaggeration here” (*NVW* 35). She continues, however, by acknowledging the “implication” that “girls of Rachel’s (and Virginia Stephen’s) age and class are both overprotected from, and the victims of, a system which exploits women intellectually, sexually and socially” (35). It is “Rachel’s ignorance about sex and her lack of a proper education” that “stem from the same social assumption that she is to be subservient in a masculine world” (35), and it is Woolf’s aim to guide Rachel, partly through the addition of Helen, away from this role, which is why the novel’s feminist commentary is so fundamental.

Helen continues soothing Rachel’s conscience, but for Rachel her “words” hew down “great blocks which had stood there always” (*TVO* 85). This image exemplifies Rachel’s continuing education throughout the novel. It also reads as a more serious version of Richard taking away “one little chink” to expose “astonishing treasures” (56). That the “light” which comes in after this hewing down of “great blocks” is “cold” (85) somewhat negates the previous description of the “light” in her cabin showing her “familiar things” (79), since it reveals to Rachel that the aspects of human experience that become “light” or “familiar” to her are not always comforting. Indeed, after being shown a somewhat disagreeable aspect of Richard’s character, Rachel becomes more familiar with some of the more unsavoury aspects of society. It is “by this new light” that Rachel sees

her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever—her life that was the only chance she had. (85)

Darkness and restriction are aligned with Rachel's limited perception of the world, which is further exemplified by her proclamation, "men are brutes! I hate men!" (85). Helen seems to coax Rachel away from this generalised perception, offering perhaps better considered and more sensibly expressed insight into the characters of both Richard and Clarissa:

"She was quite nice, but a thimble-pated creature," Helen continued. "I never heard such nonsense! Chitter-chatter-chitter-chatter—fish and the Greek alphabet—never listened to a word any one said—chock-full of idiotic theories about the way to bring up children—I'd far rather talk to him any day. He was pompous, but he did at least understand what was said to him. (86)

That the Dalloways "had not been so wonderful after all, then, in the eyes of a mature person" leads Rachel to the pertinent conclusion that "it's very difficult to know what people are like" (86). She does say of the Dalloways that "they were nice" and "extraordinarily interesting", therefore allowing herself to have an opinion that might contradict that of "a mature person" (86) such as her aunt. It is at this point that Rachel begins a slow process of accepting people's differences, as well the fact that one's opinions of them can differ from those of another. There follows a reference back to her debate with Richard:

She tried to recall the image of the world as a live thing that Richard had given her, with drains like nerves, and bad houses like patches of diseased skin. She recalled his watch-words—Unity—Imagination, and saw again the bubbles meeting in her tea-cup as he spoke of sisters and canaries, boyhood and his father, her small world becoming wonderfully enlarged. (86-87)

While aspects of Richard's overall philosophy have proven irreconcilable with Rachel's, there is now evidence that his opinions have influenced her. During the earlier debate he requests that she use her "imagination" in order to "conceive" (66) the image of the world with which he presents her. It is clear that, despite his more practical concept of the function of human beings, Richard is still somewhat attuned to the process of creating a fictional

context in order to posit a theory about the real world. In this sense, he is able to achieve a “unity” of fact and “imagination” (86), and Rachel comes to acknowledge the ease with which this can be accomplished.

It is due to the various epiphanies discussed above that Rachel decides to alter her overall perception of human beings, explaining to Helen “that most people had hitherto been symbols; but when they talked to one they ceased to be symbols” (87). She moves away from a viewpoint that is detached and one-sided, and resolves to connect more with those who surround her, as each one of them can offer her a totally new perspective on human experience. A notable moment occurs when Rachel fetches a “fat red book”, titled “*Who’s Who*,” which “gives short lives of people” (87), much like the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Rachel’s absorption “in the book” (87) symbolises her gradual movement towards different kinds of documentation, since it is a means for Rachel to attain basic information that might serve as the foundation for the discovery of less tangible aspects of a person’s identity. Lee does, however, describe the “volume of *Who’s Who*” as an “object which Virginia Woolf was fond of using as an image of male-dominated society” (NVW 37), therefore representing a kind of documentation she would not endorse given her obvious movement away from patriarchal Victorian trends in life-writing. Lee also states that “Helen begins her education of Rachel” by setting the volume of *Who’s Who* “at naught” (37). We see evidence of Helen deterring Rachel from her absorption in the book:

“I quite agree,” she said, “that people are very interesting; only—”. Rachel, putting her finger between the pages, looked up enquiringly.
“Only I think you ought to discriminate,” she ended.
“It’s a pity to be intimate with people who are—well, rather second-rate, like the Dalloways, and to find it out later.”
“But how does one know?” Rachel asked.
“I really can’t tell you,” replied Helen candidly, after a moment’s thought. (88)

Once again, Rachel is made aware of the option she has to possess a less finite and more ambivalent view of others. This is coupled with the knowledge that she can be perceived as an individual as well:

“So now you can go ahead and be a person on your own account,” she [Helen] added.

The vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind, flashed into Rachel's mind, and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living.

I can be m-m-myself," she stammered, "in spite of you, in spite of the Dalloways, and Mr. Pepper, and Father, and my Aunts, in spite of these?" (88)

What Rachel is beginning to discover is a better way to document the lives and characters of those around her, as well the knowledge that she might be documented less in terms of fact and generalisation than in terms of character. Lee states that in *The Voyage Out*, "the metaphor of a new reading is used for a new way of life", and that Rachel is taught that she can fashion her own identity in spite of the men "whose patriarchal biographies fill the pages of *Who's Who*" (VW 262).

The alteration in Rachel's perceptions does not change immediately, as we see at a celebration of the engagement between two fellow guests, Susan Warrington and Arthur Venning. In this scene, Rachel claims that men and women "should live separate", since they "cannot understand each other" and "only bring out what's worst" (TVO 170) in one another. She says this to Terence, who brushes "aside her generalisations as to the natures of the two sexes" due to how "such generalisations" bore him and seem to him "generally untrue" (170). Terence once again reveals how he, along with Helen and Rachel, is aligned with the "new biographer", while characters such as Richard and St. John seem to take the side of the traditional Victorian biographer or historian. This discrepancy is expounded upon by Lee, who states that Rachel's "upsetting encounters with two absolutely different kinds of superior males", i.e. Richard and St. John, "are laughed off by a woman [Helen] or by a man sympathetic to women [Terence]" (NVW 41). She does, however, mention that Richard and St. John "remain as indications to Rachel of unassailable male fortresses, politics and scholarship, and of the male assumptions of privilege and domination in sexuality and in intellect" (41). Both men advise Rachel "to read writers whom Virginia Woolf thought of as very much part of the male tradition" (41). St. John reacts with indignation to Rachel having "reached the age of twenty-four without reading Gibbon" (TVO 168), the 18th century historian, an indication that he would veer Rachel toward more traditional and longwinded historical narratives. He is, according to Kelley, "the sharp-cutting edge of intellectual fact against whom Rachel must measure herself" (20). St. John follows his indignant reaction by revealing his sexist attitude towards women:

“What I want to know is—” he looked at her critically. “You see, the problem is, can one really talk to you? Have you got a mind, or are you like the rest of your sex? You seem to be absurdly young compared with men of your age.”

Rachel looked at him but said nothing.

“About Gibbon,” he continued. “D’you think you’ll be able to appreciate him? He’s the test, of course. It’s awfully difficult to tell about women,” he continued, “how much, I mean, is due to lack of training, and how much is native incapacity. I don’t see myself why you shouldn’t understand—only I suppose you’ve led an absurd life until now—you’ve just walked in a crocodile, I suppose, with your hair down your back.” (168)

The suggestion is that Rachel’s assimilation of different kinds of historical documentation is still at an inchoate stage. Not only that, the fact that Gibbon is “the test” (168) holds within it the implication that the assimilation of this kind of literary work is not usually aligned with female intellectual ability. Gibbon’s work does, after all, constitute a particularly authoritative male approach to writing history, with its scope and monumentalising descriptions. Terence Hewet later soothes Rachel’s own indignation at St. John’s “insolence” (169), explaining how St. John has “lived all his life in front of a looking-glass, so to speak”, in a room with “just one splash of colour, you know, in the right place” (170). Such a description suggests narrowness and simplicity in St. John Hirst’s personal history, and offers an image of him staring in one direction only at what is familiar to him. Terence says of St. John, “there’s a great deal more in him than’s ever been got at” (171), implying that St. John has chosen to expose only the most basic information about himself, perhaps out of self-consciousness. Perhaps the only kind of personal documentation he can tolerate is the simplest kind, whether it is of himself or of others. Lee offers a comparison of Terence and St. John and suggests a reason for Rachel’s attraction to the former:

Hirst presents a satirical and divisive view. He draws chalk circles round people, partitions them and disdains. Hewet’s opposition to this view suggests that of the two men it will be he who most affects Rachel; she has already learnt what Hirst believes. By falling in love with Hewet, she moves towards his view of life as not divisive, but as always merging and confused, a matter of overlapping bubbles rather than chalk circles. (NVW 46)

That Rachel is attuned to a more insightful approach to documenting human existence is further suggested during a conversation between St. John and Helen:

That's typical of Rachel," she said. "She changes her view of life about every other day. D'you know, I believe you're just the person I want," she said, as they sat down, "to help me complete her education? She's been brought up practically in a nunnery. Her father's too absurd. I've been doing what I can—but I'm too old, and I'm a woman. Why, shouldn't you talk to her—explain things to her—talk to her, I mean, as you talk to me?"

"I have made one attempt already this evening," said St. John. "I rather doubt that it was successful. She seems to me so very young and inexperienced. I have promised to lend her Gibbon."

"It's not Gibbon exactly," Helen pondered. "It's the facts of life, I think—d'you see what I mean? What really goes on, what people feel, although they generally try to hide it? (TVO 178-179)

Helen's plea for St. John's input suggests that Rachel would benefit from exposure to the kind of documentation represented in *The Voyage Out* by characters such as St. John. A moment before Rachel is discussed, there is a pertinent interchange between Helen and St. John during which the latter is able to look past the basic facts about Helen that might distance the two, such as her age and gender:

"I'm very old," she sighed.

"The odd thing is that I don't find you old at all," he replied. "I feel as though we were exactly the same age. Moreover—" here he hesitated, but took courage from a glance at her face, "I feel as if I could talk quite plainly to you as one does to a man—about the relations between the sexes, about...and..."

In spite of his certainty a slight redness came into his face as he spoke the last two words.

She reassured him at once by the laugh with which she exclaimed, "I should hope so!" (177)

There appears, in this conversation, to be a symbolic cohesion of the basic and the complex approaches to human existence represented by St. John and Helen, respectively. This effect is noted:

Certainly a barrier which usually stands fast had fallen, and it was possible to speak of matters which are generally only alluded to between men and women when doctors are present, or the shadow of death. In five minutes he was telling her the history of his life. (177)

This cohesiveness, this fusion of insight and basic fact, is what Woolf strives to achieve in her literature and what Rachel must become accustomed to, hence the appropriateness of Helen asking St. John to assist in Rachel's education.

Later in the novel, Terence reveals his pertinence to *The Voyage Out* not only in terms of the novel's address of life-writing but also with regard to its feminist commentary. He mentions his wish to be a writer of novels, and the topic of his first planned work points to "the relationship of fact to vision" (Kelley 8):

"I want to write a novel about Silence," he said; "the things people don't say. But the difficulty is immense." He sighed. "However, you don't care," he continued. He looked at her almost severely. "Nobody cares. All you read a novel for is to see what sort of person the writer is, and, if you know him, which of his friends he's put in. As for the novel itself, the whole conception, the way one's seen the thing, felt about it, make it stand in relation to other things, not one in a million cares for that." (242)

Kelley states that in this excerpt Terence "reveals to Rachel his dream of becoming a novelist and shows her that he (like his creator) is concerned with capturing the vision in his art" (28). He is, therefore, an ideal character in that he might steer Rachel beyond mere facts, such as "what sort of person the writer is" and "which of his friends he's put in" (242), and towards the unification of fact and perception in documentation. When referring to his apparently upcoming "Stuart tragedy" (243) a moment later, Terence discusses historical fiction:

My idea is that there's a certain quality of beauty in the past, which the ordinary historical novelist completely ruins by his absurd conventions. The moon becomes the Regent of the Skies. People clap spurs to their horses and so on. I'm going to treat people as though they were exactly the same as we are. The advantage is that, detached from modern conditions, one can make them more intense and more abstract than people who live as we do. (243-244)

This excerpt does bear more relation to *Orlando* than to *The Voyage Out*, since the former work is a historical novel which breaks away from literary convention. Its protagonist is based on a contemporary of Woolf's whom she makes "more intense and more abstract". The reason why this indirect parallel to *Orlando* is so important to *The Voyage Out* is that it proves, to an extent, Woolf's early preoccupation with the conventions of certain genres and her wish to experiment with them. There is evidence here that *The Voyage Out* seems to anticipate some of Woolf's later works, including their feminist aspects. Terence speaks very eloquently about the interlinked positions of women in society and in literature:

Just consider: it's the beginning of the twentieth century, and until a few years ago no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all. There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life. Of course we're always writing about women—abusing them, or jeering at them, or worshipping them; but it's never come from women themselves. I believe we still don't know in the least how they live, or what they feel, or what they do precisely. If one's a man, the only confidences one gets are from young women about their love affairs. But the lives of women of forty, of unmarried women, of working women, of women who keep shops and bring up children, of women like your aunts or Mrs Thornbury or Miss Allan—one knows nothing whatever about them. They won't tell you. Either they're afraid, or they've got a way of treating men. It's the man's view that's represented, you see. (238)

The above excerpt points to the linked issues of women's presence in society *and* in literature, and evidence of Woolf's incorporation of a feminist commentary into *The Voyage Out* rests in the exploration of this connection. This exploration complements Woolf's conceptualisation of the term "life-writing", which goes beyond mere biography and autobiography and also includes the realistic documentation of human life in literature, often in spite of societal and literary convention. In the novel, Woolf presents a female protagonist surrounded by social conventions and attempts to write this protagonist out of any prescribed role, turning her into an undecided and complex figure who is conscious of her reception in society and her subsequent (possible) documentation in literature.

“The influences of the common sitting room”: the reflecting social and literary positions of women

We must go back to Rachel’s interaction with Clarissa Dalloway in order to ascertain how *The Voyage Out* addresses the former’s status as a young woman in early twentieth century English society. Aside from *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa also features in numerous stories by Woolf, in which she occupies the conventional role of hostess. In *The Voyage Out*, however, she compares herself with Rachel so that the reader might have an idea of the sort of woman Rachel might become, or should become in the opinions of characters such as her father. During a conversation between the two women, Clarissa puts herself on an equal footing with Rachel, saying “we know absolutely nothing about each other—and yet—I feel as I *did* know you” (59). The implication herein is that Rachel reminds Clarissa of herself at the same age, and this is suggested once again moments later:

“I am lonely,” she [Rachel] began. “I want—” She did not know what she wanted, so that she could not finish the sentence; but her lip quivered.

But it seemed that Mrs. Dalloway was able to understand without words.

“I know,” she said, actually putting one arm round Rachel’s shoulder. “When I was your age I wanted too. “No one understood until I met Richard. He gave me all I wanted. He’s man and woman as well.” Her eyes rested upon Mr. Dalloway, leaning upon the rail, still talking. “Don’t think I say that because I’m his wife—I see his faults more clearly than I see anyone else’s. What one wants in the person one lives with is that they should keep one at one’s best. I often wonder what I’ve done to be so happy!” (60-61)

While Rachel is gratified by Clarissa’s attempt to console her, there is still a sense of restriction within her words in the last paragraph of this excerpt. Clarissa, already identified as a hostess, is now ascribing her happiness to being a wife, yet another of the limited roles offered to women in early twentieth century society, and an achievement expected of Rachel. In addition, she is also describing herself in terms of her relationship with her husband, who we discover is not the most scrupulous of men. The comfort Clarissa gives to Rachel is still couched within convention, and seems at odds with what Rachel might want for herself.

That Rachel is surrounded by *literary* convention is evinced primarily by the fact that she is a character in a novel apparently directed away from societal, and therefore novelistic, convention by her creator. There is also the conversation with Terence during which he

laments how “the man’s view” of women is almost always “represented” (238), an issue which Woolf also raises in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* where she claims that “if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance” (55). She continues by elucidating the difference between the treatment of women throughout history and the characterisation of women in fiction:

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fictions; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of her husband. (56)

Woolf states that “nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century” (59), not only due to men’s inaccurate depictions of them in literature, but also because of the educational and societal restrictions which prevented women from being able to write. That “even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist” (71) is evidence of this continued restriction, although in later eras the idea of a woman writing was perhaps more often a taboo than an example of systemic educational deprivation. It was “towards the end of the eighteenth century”, however, that the “middle-class woman began to write” (84). This was mainly “to add to their pin money, or to come to the rescue of their families” (83-84), but it allowed later, more celebrated female writers to produce novels, such as “Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot” (84). Mention of Jane Austen is pertinent to *The Voyage Out* given a conversation between Rachel, Clarissa and Richard, who reveals his sexist attitude toward women:

“*Persuasion*” announced Richard, examining the volume.
“That’s for Miss Vinrace,” said Clarissa. “She can’t bear our beloved Jane”
“That—if I may say so—is because you have not read her,” said Richard. “She is incomparably the greatest female writer we possess.”
“She’s the greatest,” he continued, “and for this reason: she does not attempt to write like a man. Every other woman does; on that account, I don’t read ’em.”

“Produce your instances, Miss Vinrace,” he went on, joining his finger-tips. “I’m ready to be converted.”
He waited, while Rachel vainly tried to vindicate her sex from the slight he put upon it.
“I’m afraid he’s right,” said Clarissa. “He generally is—the wretch!” (62)

Richard Dalloway’s notion of writing “like a man” might partly constitute the unrealistic glorification of women by men which Woolf describes in *A Room of One’s Own*. That being said, later in the essay Woolf does mention that “the middle-class family in the early nineteenth century was possessed only of a single sitting-room between them”, and that if “a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room” (86). She goes on to explain that “all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion”, and that “her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting room” (87). Woolf’s opinion of Jane Austen is that if she “suffered in any way from her circumstances it was the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her” (88). With this in mind, one might guess that Richard’s good opinion of Jane Austen is due to her constant depiction of women in the roles society deems suitable. What also seems to be implied is that Rachel should not venture beyond her own narrow context, and instead conform to roles both social and literary convention deem suitable. Rachel’s status as a female character mirrors her status as a woman and Woolf attempts to direct her away from prescribed societal as well as literary norms.

“The androgynous mind” in *The Voyage Out*

Rachel’s social and cultural development should not be informed only by a patriarchal mind-set, but such a mind-set should still be incorporated into her outlook to a certain extent. While Rachel is steered away from a patriarchally informed mode of thinking, it is still not Woolf’s intention that she should jettison it entirely. What is instead encouraged is the unification, or fusion, of various ideas that are conventionally associated with masculinity and with femininity. Rigid factuality is associated with the masculine while perception and intuition, qualities that are so crucial to fiction, are associated with the feminine. Kelley suggests these associations by explaining how “the potentially visionary Rachel, feminine and intuitive, will best be defined against a man, a masculine, factual man” (15), and how “Rachel needs the sharpness of fact to carve a definite self from her unformed being before she can experience

the vision in its full intensity” (13-14). This is why her recollection of Richard’s “watch-words”, i.e. “Unity” and “Imagination” (*TVO* 86), is so fundamental to her development within the novel, since she considers, intellectually, the opinions of “a masculine, factual man”. At this moment Rachel recalls her first conversation with Richard, during which “the bubbles” in her teacup seem “to her like the union of their minds” (56). After recalling his “watch-words” she “again” sees “the bubbles meeting in her tea-cup as he spoke of sisters and canaries, boyhood and his father, her small world becoming wonderfully enlarged” (86-87). While this recollection might imply possible unity between Richard and Rachel’s viewpoints, Kelley notes how Terence also “looks for the spiritual uniting of two people and sees the event of bubbles” (23). He refers to a conversation between Terence and St. John:

“The truth of it is that one never is alone, and one never is in company,” he [Terence] concluded.
 “Meaning?” said Hirst.
 “Meaning? Oh, something about bubbles—auras—what d’you call ‘em? You can’t see my bubble; I can’t see yours; all we see of each other is a speck, like the wick in the middle of that flame. The flame goes about with us everywhere; it’s not ourselves exactly, but what we feel; the world is short, or people mainly; all kinds of people.”
 “A nice streaky bubble yours must be!” said Hirst.
 “And supposing my bubble could run into some one else’s bubble—”
 “And they both burst?” put in Hirst.
 “Then—then—then—” pondered Hewet, as if to himself, “it would be an enormous world.” (117-118)

Kelley elaborates on the similarity and compatibility between Terence and Rachel, explaining how they both tend “toward the ill-defined boundaries that characterize vision”; grow “under the eye of the truth-seeker Hirst”; and, with the help of Hirst and Helen, “can find in unity an answer to their mutual awareness of the uncertainty of the world” (24). Indeed, the characterisation of Terence is similar to the relationship between St. John and Helen, since both exemplify a cohesive union between fact and intuition, particularly in the literary sense. Helen is an outspoken female character who befriends St. John, a man whose literary tastes are “very much part of the male tradition” (Lee, *NVW* 41), while Terence’s observations and literary projects are not strictly in keeping with a patriarchal mind-set. Both these aspects of the novel suggest the aforementioned cohesion between the masculine and feminine, the necessity of which is explained by Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*.

In the final chapter of the essay Woolf hypothesises that “to think” of “one sex as distinct from the other is an effort” since it “interferes with the unity of the mind” (126), an idea she explores further and partly relates to the topic of gender:

What does one mean by ‘the unity of the mind’? I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. It can separate itself from the people in the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or it can think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out. It can think back through its fathers or through its mothers, as I have said that a woman writing thinks back through her mothers. Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. (126-127)

There is a risk of Rachel becoming “alien and critical” while being guided under the influence of Helen. There is the possibility that Helen’s influence over Rachel might be limiting. Woolf herself explains in *A Room of One’s Own* the possible negative implications of women confiding solely in women:

And again I am reminded by dipping into newspapers and novels and biographies that when a woman speaks to women she should have something very unpleasant up her sleeve. Women are hard on women. Women dislike women. Women—but are you not sick to death of the world? I can assure you that I am. Let us agree, then, that a paper read by a woman to women should end with something particularly disagreeable? (145)

A similar discrepancy permeates the dynamic between Rachel and Helen. Lee notes that while “Helen’s intellectual influence is liberating and beneficial, at the book’s underlying abstract level she has an almost sinister role to play”, since “in encouraging [Rachel] to think of life cynically and pessimistically” she makes it “harder for Rachel to find union with another person” (NVW 37). There is a point in the novel when Rachel lashes out at Helen for the latter’s sardonic and critical outlook:

Thank God, Helen, I'm not like you! I sometimes think you don't think or feel or care to do anything but exist! You're like Mr. Hirst. You see that things are bad, and you pride yourself on saying so. It's what you call being honest; as a matter of fact it's being lazy, being dull, being nothing. You don't help; you put an end to things. (295-296)

The imagery in this speech seems to equate a limited view of the world with a limited existence, as if Helen's inability to fully perceive the characters of those around her hinders her ability to live. Even her friendship with St. John Hirst is described in a negative light, as if the unification *they* symbolise is still defective. Perhaps this is because, given their respective limited outlooks, they don't look "for the spiritual uniting of two people" (Kelley 23) as Rachel and Terence do. Woolf notes how "it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple" and that "one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (AROO 136). Earlier in her essay she explains:

And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. (128)

This is perhaps why the union between Rachel and Terence is so much deeper than that between Helen and St. John, since these two seek spiritual "cooperation" or "uniting" (Kelley 23), and are less limited in their own particular perspectives. Perhaps Helen and St. John can relate to each other because of this limitation, hence their friendship, but Woolf's presentation of their dynamic is a means to emphasise the greater depth of Rachel's union with Terence.

"Walled up in an unlit room": the insidious effects of Rachel's engagement

Of course, the lovers' engagement is not a wholly positive union, as it leads to Rachel's death. Woolf's reasons for the termination of her protagonist's life are perhaps more elusive than, for example, those offered for the prolongation of Orlando's life. My contention is that

Rachel's death is linked to her ultimate inability to create an identity that is separate from societal expectations, which is due to her misguided choice of a conventional lifestyle. What catalyses her engagement is an expedition taken by various guests into the rural part of the unnamed South American country. This is perhaps where Rachel acquires the fever she dies from only four chapters later, so the place of her betrothal is also the cause of physical decline. There are subtle indicators within chapter 21 through 24 that the engagement is precarious, the first being a conversation between Terence and Helen:

“D’you realise what you’re doing?” she demanded. She’s young, you’re both young; and marriage—” Here she ceased. They begged her, however, to continue, with such earnestness in their voices, as if they only craved advice, that she was led to add:

“Marriage! well, it’s not easy.”

“That’s what we want to know,” they answered, and she guessed that now they were looking at each other.

“It depends on both of you,” she stated. (323-324)

The last statement in this excerpt reads as an interrogation of the lovers’ ability to maintain a balance of fact and vision. Kelley discusses the lovers’ difficulty in this regard, mentioning how both “tend toward the ill-defined boundaries that characterize vision” (24). This is why the presence of Helen and St. John is so crucial, since Rachel and Terence “grow under the unwinking eye of the truth-seeker Hirst” and “together, with his help and that of Helen” they “can find in unity an answer to their mutual awareness of the uncertainty in the world” (24). As in the scene where the guests celebrate Susan’s engagement to Arthur, there is proof that Helen and St. John are fundamental agents in Rachel’s maturation within the novel, as well as Terence’s. Indeed, Rachel’s engagement to Terence does at least symbolise her movement away from Helen, whose role is to “tutor” Rachel and “guide” her (Kelley 30) nearer the world of fact in order for her visionary inclinations to have better grounding. This movement away from Helen might, therefore, symbolise an abandonment of fact for vision, or perhaps a favouring of vision over fact. Kelley also states that “once [Rachel and Terence] have declared their love, Rachel has passed beyond Helen’s guardianship” (31), and so the engagement could be read as an obstruction against her continuing education thereafter. Rachel’s maturation has not reached its completion, and so her particular attempt to unify fact and vision is faulty, at least in comparison to her fiancé’s. Kelley does mention how Terence fights “his own battles, trying see whether love can avoid solidifying into the fossilized

affection of Susan and Arthur” (30). Indeed, Susan and Arthur’s rather restrictive and socially prescribed decision to get married provides a neat contrast to both Terence and Rachel’s more visionary ideals. A meditation of Susan’s after her engagement party proves that her decision can be ascribed to social pressure:

Marriage, marriage that was the right thing, the only thing, the solution required by every one she knew, and a great part of her meditations was spent in tracing every instance of discomfort, loneliness, ill-health, unsatisfied ambition, restlessness, eccentricity, taking things up and dropping them again, public speaking, and philanthropic activity on the part of men and particularly on the part of women to the fact that they wanted to marry, were trying to marry, and had not succeeded in getting married. (196)

Later in the novel, Terence ponders the confining aspects of marriage, switching between contrasting mental images of married and single people:

He tried all sorts of pictures, taking them from the lives of friends of his, for he knew many different married couples; but he saw them always, walled up in an unlit room. When, on the other hand, he began to think of unmarried people, he saw them active in an unlimited world; above all, standing on the same ground as the rest, without shelter or advantage. (272)

Kelley traces Terence’s train of thought by beginning with these meditations, and equates “love without marriage” to a “separation” of “love from the real world”, and ultimately of “vision from fact” (30). It is the pair’s acknowledgement that they “love each other” (306) during the expedition which catalyses their engagement, and Kelley mentions how in this “moment of exaltation” Terence “recognizes that he and Rachel could both love each other and maintain their individual freedom as well” (30). This statement actually touches on the main difference between Terence and Rachel. The former can more easily imagine a unification of fact and vision while the latter struggles to do so, as indicated by the following scene:

Over her loomed two great heads, the heads of a man and woman, of Terence and Helen.

Both were flushed both laughing, and the lips were moving; they came together and kissed in the air above her. Broken fragments of speech came down to her on the ground.

She thought she heard them speak of love and then of marriage.
(319-320)

Love is afforded some substantial commentary within *The Voyage Out*. At the end of Chapter 23, the following interaction occurs between St. John and the betrothed pair:

“D’you remember the morning after the dance?” he [St. John] demanded. “It was here we sat, and you talked nonsense and Rachel made little heaps of stones. I, on the other hand, had the whole meaning of life revealed to me in a flash. He paused for a second, and drew his lips together in a tight little purse. “Love,” he said. “It seems to explain everything. So, on the whole, I’m very glad that you two are going to be married.” (352)

If the abstract concept of love is equated with vision and the social institution of marriage with fact, then St. John acknowledging the importance of love is symbolic of fact recognising and accommodating vision, but such an accommodation must be made with moderation. A balance between the two must be achieved. The brokenness of Terence and Helen’s “speech” (320) regarding love and marriage seems to demonstrate Rachel’s inability to comprehend and handle this balance, this conflation. This could be the result of Rachel’s uncompleted education with the novel, but it also might point to her social status, which Kelley inadvertently raises when she mentions “individual freedom” (30). Terence can more easily unite fact with vision because he is a man in Edwardian society and thus a freer, less socially confined individual, as proven by his “seven hundred a year” (324). To recall the words of Linden Peach, “women in Victorian and Edwardian Britain usually had to endure a static domestic situation” (48) while “for men there were ‘voyages out’” (41). Rachel, whose aim at the outset of the novel is to fashion an identity outside of societal norms, and whose visionary inclinations far outweigh her ability to handle fact, is now entering a prescribed and confining arrangement that symbolises the demise of her freedom, a tragedy avoided by her actual death.

A scene featuring the betrothed couple back in Santa Marina hints at the subtly transformative effects of their engagement. Rachel is playing the piano, her apparent forte, and Kelley notes that music is “the most visionary of all the arts” as well as “Rachel’s tool for building truth” (13), so such an activity at this point might represent Rachel as lingering in the world of vision. Meanwhile, Terence is “engaged” in “shaping the world as it appeared to him now that he and Rachel were going to be married” (328), an indicator that a movement

further towards the realm of fact has catalysed some kind of change in his perceptions. For him the world is “different certainly”, and “the book called *Silence*”, his planned meditation on the more inscrutable facets of human nature, “would not now be the same book” (328). Interlocution between him and Rachel proves the conflict between Rachel’s avoidance of fact and Terence’s wish to gear his fiancé towards the socially prescribed role she has (apparently) opted for. Rachel asserts that she “won’t have eleven children” and “won’t have the eyes of an old woman”, to which Terence responds, “we must have a son and we must have a daughter” (332), thereby forcing the task of motherhood upon her. The damaging effects of motherhood are demonstrated two chapters later, when Rachel observes Mrs. Thornbury and notes how “this long life and all these children” seem “to have rubbed away the marks of individuality, and to have left only what was old and maternal” (359). After Rachel insists to Terence that their son “should in no way resemble [...] St. John Hirst” (332), the conversation continues as follows:

At this Terence professed the greatest admiration for St. John Hirst. Dwelling upon his good qualities he became seriously convinced of them; he had a mind like a torpedo, he declared, aimed at falsehood. Where should we all be without him and his like? Choked in weeds; Christians, bigots,—why, Rachel herself, would be a slave with a fan to sing songs to men when they felt drowsy.

“But you’ll never see it!” he exclaimed; “because with all your virtues you don’t, and you never will, care with every fibre of your being for the pursuit of truth! You’ve no respect for facts, Rachel; you’re essentially feminine.” (332-333)

In a moment that contrasts his earlier visionary inclinations, Terence at once praises a man who aligns himself with fact and reproaches Rachel for her inability to do the same. Terence seems to have acclimatised himself to a context more closely aligned with fact and wishes for Rachel to follow, but for her to do so might mean forfeiting the identity she wishes to fashion for herself. A moment later, Rachel begins writing letters, producing “phrases which bore a considerable likeness to those which she had condemned” (333), one of which is described as “awkward and ugly”, stating that she and Terence are “both very happy, and going to be married in the autumn probably and hope to live in London, where we hope you will come and see us when we get back” (334). Lee states that “in answering the letters of congratulation, Rachel feels an absurd dichotomy to exist between the words of communication and her aloof sense of reality” (NVW 47). I would say, however, that in

having Rachel write “affectionately” rather than “sincerely” (*TVO* 334) before signing the letter, Woolf seems to be subtly calling into question the sincerity of language surrounding courtship. It is the words that are aloof, not Rachel. Terence simultaneously reads a novel at this moment, and offers a synopsis of it, beginning thus:

Listen to this Rachel. ‘It is probable that Hugh’ (he’s the hero, a literary man), ‘had not realised at the time of his marriage, any more than the young man of parts and imagination usually does realise, the nature of the gulf which separates the needs and desires of the female....’ (334)

He later describes Hugh’s wife:

Betty was an admirable mother; but it did not take her long to find out that motherhood, as that function is understood by the mother of the upper middle classes, did not absorb her energies. She was young and strong, with healthy limbs and a body and brain that called urgently for exercise....’ (In short she began to give tea-parties.) (334)

Betty’s apparent movement away from the socially prescribed role of mother has its detrimental effects:

Women’s wraps and absurd little feminine shoes and umbrellas were in the hall....Then the bills began to come in....He tried to speak frankly to her. He found her lying on the great polar-bear skin in their bedroom, half-undressed, for they were dining with the Greens in Wilton Crescent, the ruddy firelight making the diamonds wink and twinkle on her arms and in the delicious curve of her breast—a vision of adorable femininity. He forgave her all. (335)

After this, a “conclusion” is reached by the hero, and Terence voices the doubts his reading has provoked:

‘They were different. Perhaps, in the far future, when generations of men had struggled and failed as he must now struggle and fail, woman would be, indeed, what she now made a pretence of being—the friend and companion—not the enemy and parasite of man.’

“The end of it is, you see, Hugh went back to his wife, poor fellow. It was his duty, as a married man. Lord, Rachel,”

he [Terence] concluded, “will it be like that when we’re married?” (335)

The novel Terence is reading presents the situation his marriage might devolve into, and Rachel is implicated in that potential devolvment for two possible reasons. The first is that the socially prescribed nature of the lovers’ marriage might be jeopardised if it is exposed to too much of the feminine or visionary outlook which Rachel represents. The second is that the unification of her outlook and Terence’s might not be cohesive enough for the marriage to be maintained. Indeed, Terence’s book does strongly suggest that a woman’s abandonment of her socially prescribed duties as wife and hopeful mother would be detrimental to a marriage. It is an example of how social and domestic concerns inform the literary content of the era. This is not to say, however, that the unification of masculine and feminine ideals or the fusion of fact and vision are discouraged, but rather that the balance between them be maintained. That being said, the hero of the novel is a married man who performs “his duty”, and his (apparently) undutiful wife is implied to be the “enemy” (335). This implies that the possible dissolution of a marriage seems, at least in the context of *The Voyage Out*, to be ascribed almost solely to the woman’s abandonment of her socially prescribed marital role.

Rachel’s response to Terence takes the form of a mere question as to why people don’t “write about the things they do feel” (335), a possible criticism of the insincere image of married life constructed within Edwardian society, an image Rachel wants to avoid. In replying, “that’s the difficulty” (335), Terence is perhaps echoing her concern. That being said, Rachel’s worry stems from a wish to construct an identity that might come into conflict with Edwardian social norms, while Terence’s has more to do with the consequence of this construction. Both characters are perturbed by the possible social implications of their union. Just afterwards, however, there is a moment of rebellion during which Rachel and Terence’s engagement is compared to being “flung into the sea”, “washed hither and thither” and “driven about the roots of the world”, the idea of which is “incoherently delightful” (336). Terence takes delight in observing Rachel’s rebellion, as to him she appears “to be cleaving a passage for herself, and dealing triumphantly with the obstacles which would hinder their passage through life” (336). Terence’s qualms are subdued, and the sea metaphor continues:

“It does seem possible!” he exclaimed, “though I’ve always thought it the most unlikely thing in the world—I shall be in love with you all my life, and our marriage will be the most exciting thing that’s ever been done! We’ll never have a

moment's peace—" He caught her in his arms as she passed him, and they fought for mastery, imagining a rock, and the sea heaving beneath them. (336)

It is now Terence's aim to be a guide for his future wife, just as Helen and St. John are. This is perhaps the best decision given his more successful acclimatisation to the world of fact, catalysed by his sex and therefore his more expansive social freedom. His role as guide is best demonstrated in the following excerpt:

But he had known many more people, and was far more highly skilled in the art of narrative than Rachel was, whose experiences were, for the most part, of a more curiously childlike and humorous kind, so that it generally fell to her lot to listen and ask questions.

He told her not only what had happened, but what he had thought and felt, and sketched for her portraits which fascinated her of what other men and women might be supposed to be thinking and feeling, so that she became very anxious to go back to England, which was full of people, where she could merely stand in the streets and look at them. (337)

This excerpt is preceded by each of the pair "filling out for the other the course of their past lives, and the characters of their friends and relations" (336-337), another example of biography being commonplace in social interaction. It is an approach to documenting others that Terence will guide Rachel through, since Rachel's maturation is dependent on an outlook that successfully fuses fact with insight. Terence does indeed acknowledge that there is some kind of foundation from which one's outlook can grow:

According to him, too, there was an order, a pattern which made life reasonable, or if that word was foolish, made it of deep interest anyhow, for sometimes it seemed possible to understand why things happened as they did. Nor were people so solitary and uncommunicative as she believed. She should look for vanity—for vanity was a common quality—first in herself, then in Helen, in Ridley, in St. John, they all had their share of it—and she would find it in ten people out of every twenty she met; and once linked together by one such tie she would find them not separate and formidable, but practically indistinguishable, and she would come to love them when she found they were like herself. (337)

The “pattern” discussed herein refers to the foundational fact which might bring Rachel closer to the world around her and on which she can base her insight. There is the option for her to reject this unified outlook, but if she “denied” it then she would have to “defend her belief that human beings were as various as beasts in the Zoo” (337). This reads as another subtle criticism of Rachel’s ability to document those around her in a sufficient way. Her particular outlook does, however, have a positive effect on Terence, since “in return for what he could tell her she bought him such curiosity and sensitiveness of perception” (338), i.e. those qualities particular to Rachel’s outlook. Terence actually wonders what “experience” would give Rachel “after all”, apart from a “kind of ridiculous formal balance” (338), a reference to the blend of fact and vision that Rachel must achieve. It almost seems as if Rachel’s own outlook is good enough for Terence, and that their relationship will constitute a fine balance between fact and vision in itself.

The illusion of their possible comfort in marriage is shattered, however, when the prospect of moving to London is considered:

“Only a thousand a year and perfect freedom,” he replied. “How many people in London d’you think have that?”

“And now you’ve spoilt it,” she complained. “Now we’ve got to think of the horrors.” (340)

One of the “horrors” Rachel ponders is whether it is “true” that “women die with bugs crawling across their faces” (340). It seems that various facets of Rachel’s particular mentality come into confluence at this point. There is a sense of social awareness here, which recalls her mention of the “old widow in her room, somewhere, let us suppose in the suburbs of Leeds” (66) during her debate with Richard Dalloway. This also an echo of the paranoia regarding women’s social status she demonstrates when asking Helen about “those women in Piccadilly” (85). The question Rachel poses to Terence might be a cause of her failure to “[acquire] that social balance which is a characteristic of the mature person” (Moore 90). That this moment echoes the earlier two is perhaps proof that Rachel has not fully matured in her ability to balance fact sufficiently with vision. Rachel still seems to crave a more insightful approach to human existence, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

“What’s so detestable in this country,” she exclaimed, “is the blue—always blue sky and blue sea. It’s like a curtain—all the things one wants are on the other side of that. I want to know what’s going on behind it. I hate these divisions, don’t you,

Terence? One person all in the dark about another person.”
(340)

The word “divisions” might be misleading, as Rachel could be interpreted as wishing for the unification she has not yet achieved. The “divisions” Rachel mentions are actually those caused by the recurring societal preference for a superficial and possibly insincere outlook on existence, as opposed to one that is more insightful and understanding. Kelley states that “Rachel’s personal voyage is one in which love helps her to discover herself but to reject the world outside herself” (7). While I feel her situation is not as precise as this, there is the definite sense that the prospect of marriage will create an imbalance between her personal context and that which surrounds her. Rachel’s discomfort upon considering this greater context exemplifies Kelley’s assertion that her tragedy “lies in her inability to unite her world with the world around her” (7-8). Lee states that “in her efforts to create a personality for herself, she has become a divisive person”, and claims that Terence becomes “the unifier” (NVW 47), or at least attempts to do so. He notices Rachel’s discomfort at this point in their conversation, and responds thus:

“I sometimes think you’re not in love with me and never will be,” he said energetically. She started and turned round at his words.

“I don’t satisfy you in the way you satisfy me,” he continued. “There’s something I can’t get hold of in you. You don’t want me as I want you—you’re always wanting something else.”

He began pacing up and down the room.

“Perhaps I ask too much,” he went on. “Perhaps it isn’t really possible to have what I want. Men and woman are too different. You can’t understand—you don’t understand—”

(341)

The difference Terence notes between men and women is pertinent to understanding why the engagement is detrimental. It actually points to a discrepancy between male and female freedom, particularly in Woolf’s era. Though he might not realise it, and despite being averse to the idea of marriage, Terence will be comfortable with his role as husband, as it will not detract from his personal freedom. He will be able to unite his world with that which surrounds him. The same cannot be said for Rachel, who wrestles between the prospect of a confining space in which she will play a socially prescribed role, and the space outside it, which would better accommodate her more visionary and insightful inclinations. With regard

to the engagement, it is interesting that Rachel's words, "let's break it off", do "more to unite them [she and Terence] than any form of argument" (341). A moment later, the couple sit "side by side", and at this point the "divisions" disappear, and it seems "as if the world were once more solid and entire, and as if, in some strange way, they had grown larger and stronger" (342). They are comfortably unified as a couple, yet the engagement poses the threat of their division. Rachel would be divided between the world of marriage and the world outside it, and Terence would be divided from her as a result. They do not decide to cancel the engagement, perhaps seeing themselves as strong enough to endure it, but a moment at the end of Chapter 22 breaks the sense of their unity and strength:

They stood together in front of the looking-glass, and with a brush tried to make themselves look as if they had been feeling nothing all the morning, neither pain nor happiness. But it chilled them to see themselves in the glass, for instead of being vast and indivisible they were really very small and separate, the size of the glass leaving a large space for the reflection of other things. (342)

Once again in Woolf's *oeuvre*, a framed image is used to differentiate reality from possible falsity. It recalls Mrs. Thornbury's comments on hansom cab mirrors, but while these might hold an image that bears no proper relation to the actual character of the person reflected, it is the looking-glass that bears the realistic image in this scene. Kelley notes how Terence and Rachel seek to "escape the factual world" in which "vision can exist only sporadically" (31-32), and the reflection in the looking-glass is symbolic of the factual world impinging upon the unity of this visionary couple.

There are moments in Chapter 24 which suggest Rachel's final assimilation of a balance between fact and vision. While in the same room in which Susan and Arthur's engagement party was held, she at considers the 'voyage' she has taken, and the point at which she has arrived:

She felt herself amazingly secure as she sat in her arm-chair, and able to review not only the night of the dance, but the entire past, tenderly and humorously, as if she had been turning in a fog for a long time, and could now see exactly where she had turned. (354)

It seems here that Rachel, by assessing her past and the journey she has taken, is becoming “autobiographical” (20). She is, however, uncertain about the mental documentation of this journey, since

the methods by which she had reached her present position, seemed to her very strange, and the strangest thing about them was that she had not known where they were leading her. That was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted, and followed blindly, suffering so much in secret, always unprepared and amazed and knowing nothing; but one thing led to another and by degrees something had formed itself out of nothing, and so one reached at last this calm, this quiet, this certainty, and it was this process that people called living. (354)

It is not merely a documentation of the past that Rachel is trying to achieve, but rather one that is concurrent with her experiences. She is trying to establish an identity that might result from these experiences, but perhaps she feels that they are too ill-defined to form the foundation for that identity. What Rachel needs is intervention from the foundational world of fact, as proven already by the guidance she has received from Helen, Terence and St. John. It is in the excerpt below that she appears to acknowledge the necessity of fact in establishing an identity:

Perhaps, then, every one really knew as she knew now where they were going; and things formed themselves into a pattern not only for her, but for them, and in the pattern lay satisfaction and meaning. When she looked back she could see that a meaning of some kind was apparent in the lives of her aunts, and in the brief visit of the Dalloways whom she would never see again, and in the life of her father. (355)

The “pattern” discussed here recalls the “pattern” mentioned by Terence, which “made life reasonable, or if that word was foolish, made it of deep interest anyhow, for sometimes it seemed possible to understand why things happened as they did” (337). By acknowledging this pattern, Rachel is possibly trying to anchor her mostly undefined identity within the realm of fact, fusing the facts of her own life with her visionary mentality in order to construct an identity that is more rounded and palpable. The one remaining issue is the fact that the successful construction of this identity is threatened by her engagement. Rachel seems lulled into a sense of false comfort, thinking herself “independent” of Terence despite the prospect

of marrying him and living with him “for thirty, or forty, or fifty years” (356). It is “love” (356) to which she ascribes this apparent ability to balance this independence with the prospect of marrying Terence, but the use of such an abstract and visionary ideal is further undermined by the world of fact. Miss Allan’s statement, “getting engaged seems to be quite the fashion” (357) reminds the reader of Susan’s engagement and its ascription to social pressure. Later in the chapter, Mrs. Thornbury discusses women who are apparently able to live more independently while married, “women with household cares of every sort, going out and doings things that we should have thought it possible to do” (360). Her claim that “they remain women” by giving “a great deal to their children” (360) is confining, since she seems to suggest that child-rearing is a role suited only for women, while social freedom seems to detract from their womanliness. The oddness of this statement is perhaps why Rachel does not “like to be included in the same lot” (360). She might still be trying to avoid the prescribed role of motherhood, or she is perhaps concerned about society’s scrutiny of her possible independence. In any case, it seems Rachel is still not properly capable of contemplating the easy confluence of her independence and her marriage. The outspoken character Evelyn Murgatroyd² has a rather depressing outlook on both Rachel and Susan’s decisions to marry their respective partners:

² Later in this chapter, Evelyn divulges a scheme to

found a club—a club for doing things, really doing them. She became very animated, as she talked, for she professed herself certain that if once twenty people—no, ten would be enough if they were keen—set about doing things instead they could abolish almost every evil that exists. It was brains that were needed. If only people with brains—of course they would want a room, a nice room, in Bloomsbury preferably, where they could meet once a week.... (362).

This could refer to ‘the Bloomsbury group’, which Lee describes in *Virginia Woolf* as a “term” applied to “a number of like-minded friends living in a particular area of London and involved mainly with the arts and politics” (262-263). These “friends” included, among others, Woolf and her husband Leonard; her sister and brother-in-law, Vanessa and Clive Bell; Lytton Strachey; novelist E.M. Forster; and Roger Fry, the subject of Woolf’s sole attempt at biography proper. Woolf herself was “referring to the ‘group’ by 1914” (263), the year before *The Voyage Out* was published. Lee notes the issues raised by Woolf in her first three novels, *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *Jacob’s Room*:

The changing shapes of the novels these characters are in illustrate the new readings they want to make for their lives. What new work can be done, what kinds of lives and marriages and thoughts are now possible for women, and for the young? What connections are there between conventions in behaviour and conventions in art? (262)

Therefore, in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf makes subtle autobiographical reference to her various attempts at addressing “the questions of her time, her class, her friends and family, her ‘group’” (262).

They moved so slowly because they were not single but double, and Susan was attached to Arthur, and Rachel to Terence, and for the sake of this one man they had renounced all other men, and movement and the real things of life. Love was all very well, and those snug domestic houses, with the kitchen below and the nursery above, which were so secluded and self-contained, like little islands in the torrents of the world; but the real things were surely the things that happened, the causes, the wars, the ideals, which happened in the great world outside, and went so independently of these women, turning so quietly and so beautifully towards the men. She looked at them. Of course they were happy and content, but there must be better things than that. Surely one could get nearer to life, one could get more out of life, one could enjoy more and feel more than they would ever do. Rachel in particular looked so young—what would she know of life? (361-362)

Domestic confinement, gender-based privilege, and exclusion from the outside world all collapse into this one excerpt. The alignment of social freedom with getting “nearer to life” is as interesting as it is ominous, since the implication is that Rachel, by choosing domesticity, is moving further away from life and closer to a kind of death.

“The union which had been impossible while they lived”: writing Rachel away from a social death

Mrs. Thornbury’s claim at the end of Chapter 24, that “it must be wonderful to be twenty-five, and not merely to imagine that you’re twenty-five” (366) echoes this omen, since it is before turning twenty-five that Rachel’s own life comes to an end. Something must be said about the fact that her death occurs in the novel’s 25th chapter, since the novel’s structure and Rachel’s life seem aligned at this point. Rachel has progressed not only through 24 years, but 24 chapters as well,³ while trying to perfect the means of establishing an identity for herself. She has been trying to write her autobiography in a sense, and her death signifies the end of that process. This comes into confluence with the threat of her social death. In opting for the socially prescribed role of wife at such an early age, and without completing her education under the guidance of other characters, Rachel cannot sufficiently create an identity that is

³ This number also corresponds exactly to the number of hours in a day. Time is, according to Lodwick Hartley, often “the most important element in a novel of Mrs. Woolf” (236), as exemplified by *Mrs Dalloway*, whose original title was going to be “The Hours”, and whose narrative is punctuated at various intervals by the striking of Big Ben; the titling of novels such as *Night and Day* and *The Years*; and the short but eventful (and devastating) middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, entitled “Time Passes”. Woolf often parallels set temporal constructs with aspects of her characters’ lives, as we shall see in *Orlando*, whose protagonist owns an estate consisting of 365 rooms (see p60).

separate from that role. If literature is supposed to reflect and emphasise the societal expectations of women, as in the case of Austen's *Persuasion* and the novel Terence reads in Chapter 23, then Woolf is writing Rachel into social and therefore literary convention by having her marry Terence. If Rachel's existence becomes too shrouded by these conventions, then she cannot present to the world an identity she has constructed on her own. In short, she cannot become "autobiographical" (20). The identity she will have is one society forces upon her. It is not her real self, or the expression of her own true character. The confluence of fact and vision ties into this, as Rachel's engagement obstructs her ability to achieve this confluence sufficiently. Up till her death she remains vision-oriented due to her underdeveloped education. Chapter 25 sees Rachel's gradual deterioration over the course of two weeks, and it is her mental instability during this time that symbolises and emphasises her overwhelming tendency towards vision. This begins on the second day of her illness, when she is "completely cut off, and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, isolated alone with her body" (371), signifying a movement away from her greater context and further into her own imagination. The mental deterioration worsens, and she becomes "oblivious of the world outside, because it needed all her attention to follow the hot, red, quick sights which passed incessantly before her eyes" (383). She begins to notice "faces", which she does not recognise, two of them being "Helen's" (383) and "Terence's" (384). That she cannot recognise the faces of her previous guides towards the world of fact signifies her almost definite movement towards vision. Her eventual death, while tragic, has a peculiar effect on Terence:

Once he held his breath and listened acutely; she was still breathing; he went on thinking for some time; they seemed to be thinking together; he seemed to be Rachel as well as himself; and then he listened again; no, she had ceased to breathe. It was happiness, it was perfect happiness. They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived. Unconscious whether he thought the words or spoke them aloud, he said, "No two people have ever been so happy as we have been."⁴ No one has ever loved as we have loved."

⁴ This line is echoed by Woolf in a letter she wrote to Leonard Woolf, dated 'Tuesday', and therefore probably written on Tuesday 18th March, ten days before her suicide. In it she writes to her husband "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been" (Woolf, qtd. in Lee, VW 757). There was a second, undated letter written just before her death, not identical to the previous one but still reminiscent of it. In this letter she states to Leonard, "no one could have been as good as you have been" (760).

It seemed to him that their complete union and happiness filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely. He had no wish in the world left unfulfilled. They possessed what could never be taken from them. (398)

Terence seems to acknowledge that he and Rachel have already achieved some kind of union due to their loving each other. Such a union would have been spoilt by the marriage that might have had destructive effects on both characters.

Conclusion

It seems that Rachel's death is a means to ensure their happiness as a couple is validated and uncompromised. In addition, Rachel's social death, and the erasure of her own identity, has been avoided. Of course, it seems a drastic measure taken by Woolf to get her character out of a possibly ill-advised marriage, but it is actually an effectual means to demonstrate the consequences of a young woman's enlightenment being impeded upon by social obligations and pressure. Interestingly, Rachel's ability to document others is also compromised in the last few chapters, as her inability to combine fact and vision in her outlook means she cannot be a sufficient biographer of others. This model of biography is, of course, dictated by Woolf, who asserts that the biographer's task is to combine the "truth of fact and truth of fiction" (NB 191-192),⁵ the intuitive aspects of fiction belonging to the side of vision. Woolf's overall agenda in *The Voyage Out* is to demonstrate how a socially prescribed and confined existence hinders one's ability to approach and document the outside world sufficiently, and to create a notable identity separate from one's apparent function in society. Her choice of a female protagonist is a means to highlight the social restriction and loss of identity suffered by women in her era.

⁵ See p6

Chapter Two-

“A great variety of selves”: Woolf’s Multifaceted Biographical Excursion/Subversion in *Orlando*

Introduction

At the beginning of her book *13 Ways of Looking at the Novel*, Jane Smiley offers a list of 101 novels, each representative of its author’s *oeuvre*, but, in some cases, not necessarily a previously proclaimed signature work by the author in question. One such novel is *Orlando*. Her choice is surprising since *Orlando* has been considered by numerous critics and even by Woolf herself, according to Esther Sánchez-Pardo González, “to be a minor work when compared with the rest of her literary production” (75), being overshadowed particularly by *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. It does, however, occur in the middle of its author’s most experimental period of writing, the same that saw the publication of the three novels mentioned above. The inclusion of *Orlando* in the list pulls it out of this shadow and calls to mind its experimental quality. Smiley discusses the novel later in her work:

Orlando presents itself as a biography, but it quickly becomes clear that Woolf is not delivering a realistic assessment of Orlando in her life and times, but something more eccentric. Woolf uses fanciful set pieces, authorial remarks, and a gossipy tone about literary history to encourage the reader to keep reading even as Orlando’s story becomes more and more unusual. The result is a fairly successful experiment (though not as profound or as polished as some of Woolf’s other novels).
(232)

In a work of criticism that so obviously seeks to address the numerous ways in which one can approach the novel as a genre, Smiley is subtly addressing how *Orlando* is a novel and how it is not. Its full title is, after all, *Orlando: A Biography*, a clue in the search for its generic nature and its author’s literary agenda. Woolf actually mentions in a letter to Vita Sackville-West written around the time of her conception of *Orlando* that she “could revolutionise biography in a night”, supposing that “Orlando turns out to be Vita” (*Selected Letters (SL)* 231). Upon reading how “dazzled, bewitched, [and] enchanted” (Sackville-West, qtd. in Lee, VW 519) Vita was by *Orlando*, Woolf responded that as her “biographer” she felt “infinitely relieved and happy” (*SL* 241), clear evidence that Woolf had moulded together a piece of work in which she incorporated some kind of biographical agenda. Suzanne Raitt’s claim, on

the other hand, is that the text “was intended to function in several related ways”, namely as “a panoramic historical portrait of England through the ages”, as an “exploration of female friendship and of men in relation to women’s sexuality”, and as a “celebratory commemoration of Vita Sackville-West, Woolf’s friend and, for some time, lover” (17). She also states that the novel’s “place in the biographical tradition of the 1920s has been given little critical attention” (19), which is surprising given the emergence of the new trend in biographical writing before and during its publication, as well as Woolf’s intentions and Raitt’s views, as expressed above. It seems that Woolf’s biographical agenda actually goes hand in hand with each of these. As a biography, albeit a subversive one, *Orlando* has to incorporate history into its narrative as well as serve as a “commemoration” of its subject. In addition, the question of gender, though one might not realise it, fits quite well into Woolf’s address and ultimate subversion of Victorian biographical norms. This chapter seeks to investigate how Woolf has related the narrative of *Orlando* to Vita Sackville-West’s life, and why; how the text self-reflexively addresses biography and other types of historical and/or fact-based accounts; and how she relates the issues of gender and sexuality to the attitudes towards biographical writing that were prevalent in her era.

When writing about a work claimed by its author to be a biography, it might be thought worthwhile to set that book alongside another biography on the same subject. No two accounts of a person’s life are ever the same. In the preface to *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West*, Glendinning alludes to biography’s inexactness, mentioning the fact that her work “is Vita Sackville’s story” but that “one of the ‘lies’ of all biography is in that fact”, as well as that “any story can never be the whole story” (xvii). That being said, when the work in question is *Orlando*, purporting to be an account of Sackville-West’s life, proponents and critics of biographical writing would perhaps consider it mandatory to have nearby such a work as Glendinning’s from which to pick out recounted instances in the subject’s life which may have inspired Woolf’s writing. Lee notes how different *Orlando* is from the events of Sackville-West’s life:

The glamorous and sensational facts of Vita’s life, which Victoria Glendinning summed up as ‘an adventure story’, contrast dramatically with Virginia Woolf’s history. Some of it would have been known to Virginia when they were introduced in 1922. And part of the attraction was the story Vita had to tell. Virginia fell on it, dramatised and exaggerated it, long before

she wrote *Orlando*. But Vita hardly needed dramatising for her to make a strong impression on Virginia. (VW 487)

Indeed, if one biography is just as inexact and unreliable as any other, then such a comparison might be deemed a fruitless exercise. On the other hand, documented fact and the subject's noted personal idiosyncrasies as documented in biography proper would be helpful in deciphering the biographical agenda in a work such as *Orlando*. This is because Woolf's book, while being indisputably fantastical, is written not only with the idea of biography in mind, but reads very self-consciously as a biography.

A "serious and sympathetic companion": Orlando and his biographer

The metatextual references to biographical writing appear at numerous points throughout "this record" (O 14), beginning very early in the narrative:

Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor did he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. (12)

Such an early excerpt already carries with it faulty assumptions one might make about biography. The coupling of the subject and "his scribe" (12) is interesting. It implies that the biographer has an obligation towards the subject, that both are conspirators in the documentation of the latter's life, which apparently *should* only include his or her victories and virtues. It also suggests that biographies are written concurrently with the subject's actual progression through life, ignoring the fact that so many biographies are written after their subjects' deaths. Later, at the mention of Orlando's mind "stopping at nothing", the "biographer" referred to at points in the novel is given the strict command not to "stop either", but to "fly as fast as he can and so keep pace with the unthinking passionate foolish actions and sudden extravagant words in which, it is impossible to deny, Orlando at the time of his life indulged" (32). It is a criticism of Woolf's that the Victorian biographer's agenda is to immortalise an almost totally virtuous version of the subject in a methodical or stepwise fashion. The image in *Orlando* of a biographer flying "as fast as he can" and keeping "pace" (32) with the subject recalls Woolf's description of the biographer as a "serious and

sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero" (NB 189),¹ though Orlando's biographer is presented as somewhat distant from his subject, therefore being unable to depict him in the manner a traditional Victorian biographer might. In a novel written self-consciously as a Victorian biography, Woolf has subtly addressed, yet subverted, this tendency towards devotion by presenting the subject as somewhat elusive and insisting upon the constancy of the traditional "chronicler" while writing as the "artist" (189) she describes in "The New Biography". What she has offered in *Orlando*, therefore, is a blend of the actuality required in Victorian biography and the artistry associated with the 'new' biography. The simultaneous progress of the biographer and the subject also suggests a limited and one-sided account of the subject. There is a great deal of certainty implied herein that a biographer need never encounter difficulty in detailing the life of his subject, nor discover fault or irregularity in his subject's history or character. It is only the deeds undertaken, the "glory" (12) accomplished and the offices filled which might be said to sum up the character of the person in question, perhaps with no mention of any misstep or inclusion of any additional information. Woolf's omniscient narrator notes, when approaching the subject of Orlando's womanising tendencies, that "here, indeed, we lay bare rudely, as a biographer may, a curious trait in him" (20). The use of the auxiliary "may" suggests that it is within the biographer's freedom to reveal the depravity of his subject, whatever its nature, but that it is perhaps typical of the biographer not to. By including these aspects of Orlando's nature, Woolf is subtly drawing attention to the Victorian biographer's tendency to leave out controversial information.²

The "luminous halo": Orlando's historical and temporal contexts

Orlando is not just a biography, but a history. We are not reading the story of one person, but of the eras and environs over which Orlando's life is written. That Orlando might be considered a product of his era is implied after Queen Elizabeth witnesses him cavorting with another woman. The question posed by the narrator is "are we to blame Orlando?" for this impropriety, the possible justification for it being that "the age was the Elizabethan", whose "morals were not ours" (19). A clear distinction is made between the values of the Elizabethan period and "the withered intricacies and ambiguities" of a "more gradual and

¹ See p6.

² This recalls the scenario in "The Art of Biography" involving the "widow and the friends" (120) forcing the biographer to present a perfect image of his subject (see p5).

doubtful age” which were then “unknown” (20). Both periods are placed side by side, the earlier with no conception of the latter, and the latter with a *somewhat* informed conception of the earlier. Such positioning of these two time zones seems to suggest the near impossibility of describing either effectively in biographical or historical literature. Biographers inevitably have a limited image of the past no matter how thorough their investigations into it. That *Orlando* itself is a limited account is made explicit in Orlando speaking “for the first time in this record” (14). The novel has only just begun and the reader is not privy to any possible pertinent event or utterance that might have occurred or been made beforehand. Again, the text is addressing its own biographical nature as a means of calling to mind the attendant limitations of the genre. In addition, it is not sufficient merely to take Orlando’s period and setting into account. Indeed it is rather his personality that influences his behaviour. He can still act against societal norms despite the expectations that society has of him due to his rank. We must remember that Woolf’s narrator has only *suggested* that historical context might be a reason for Orlando’s character, and s/he seems to suggest elsewhere in the novel that there are problems with using context to excuse or explain a particular action or choice on behalf of the subject, especially after Orlando’s transformation, where our protagonist’s outspokenness and charisma counter the expectations of the gendered society around her. It is notable how Orlando is not unduly conscious about sexual impropriety when he is a man, but after turning into a woman, makes an effort to behave in a manner befitting a woman. This will be explored later, but for now we can say that perhaps the use of historical context as a justification for social behaviour makes the subject less accountable so that we, as the readers and receptors of the image of the subject, cannot easily criticise him or her. In addition, such deliberate contextualisation creates a stilted, almost unexciting image of the subject, since he or she seems unchangeable given the set values and attitudes of the time period in question. If we were to insist upon this idea of context as an excuse for character, then Orlando cannot be an autonomous individual.

There is mention in the novel of “nature, who has played so many tricks on us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case” (55). This echoes the excerpt from Woolf’s “The New Biography”, in which she thinks “of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility” (186).³ This specific excerpt points to the aforementioned limitations put upon the biographer, and of the need to present an image of the subject that is as true as it possibly

³ See p3.

can be. Woolf is elaborating upon the difficulty of this task by pointing out how personality is fluid and therefore difficult to capture in such a precise manner. It is perhaps the combination of both a fluid personality and the effects of one's own ever-changing context that renders the biographer's task so difficult. Time features constantly in Woolf's *oeuvre*,⁴ and the notion of its fluidity is pertinent to *Orlando*, given the novel's self-conscious attempt at the linear documentation of a person's history. Woolf's narrator tries to demonstrate the difficulty of capturing the progression of life so easily by contrasting a person's mental progression with actual time:

The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation. But the biographer, whose interests are, as we have said, highly restricted, must confine himself to one simple statement: when a man has reached the age of thirty, as Orlando now had, time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long; time when he is doing becomes inordinately short. (68)

The biographer's attempt at documenting Orlando's life is in contrast with the protagonist's own progression. That this "discrepancy" is explicitly referred to exemplifies the reflexive manner in which the text considers the problems with biographical writing. The biographer's strict adherence to the linear progression of time is at odds with Orlando's actual experience of time:

It would be no exaggeration to say that he would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five at least. Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most. Altogether, the task of estimating human life (of the animals' we presume not to speak) is beyond our capacity, for directly we say that it is ages long, we are reminded that it is briefer than the fall of a rose leaf to the ground. (69)

Past, present *and* future surround our protagonist, recalling Woolf's own claim in her essay "Modern Fiction" (MF) that life "is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" but

⁴ See p47n3.

rather “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (120). The idea of the “luminous halo” does imply that our present context determines our characters, but it also suggests its continuity with the past and the future. In expanding a life that might have lasted less than a single century into one that covers several, Woolf has implied that one’s existence, whether as man or as woman, transcends one’s present circumstances, and is determined also by the past and the unfolding future into which her character’s life extends. An existence can, therefore, not just be documented in a stepwise manner, beginning in one arbitrary moment and ending at another.

“Haunted by a variety of ghosts”: ancestry and Knole

Orlando’s ancestry is described so as to suggest what in the past might have determined his own character. That he is of aristocratic lineage is made evident by mention of his forefathers coming “out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads” (11). The “mists” mentioned here, along with description of these ancestors having “ridden in fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by strange rivers” (11), create a sense of mystery, prefiguring the beguiling turn of events recounted in the novel. That Orlando’s forefathers had also ridden “in Africa and France” (11) reflects primarily our protagonist’s exploitative imperialist ancestry, but also implies a flirtation with the exotic in earlier eras, recalling the exotic portion of Vita Sackville-West’s ancestry, her maternal grandmother being a Spanish gipsy dancer. Later in the novel, Orlando describes to the Russian princess Sasha “the whole history of his family”, how his house “was one of the most ancient in Britain” and how his ancestors “had come from Rome with the Caesars and had the right to walk down the Corso (which is the chief street in Rome) under a tasselled palanquin, which he said is a privilege reserved only for those of imperial blood” (33). This history is preceded by Orlando comparing Sasha to “a fox, an olive tree, or green hill-top” (33), so she and the reader already have an idea of how fanciful he is, and therefore how hyperbolic and inaccurate he might be. In addition, we now have a complicated view of his ancestry, not knowing whether the majority of his ancestors came from Rome or from “France with the Conqueror” (51). That Orlando has a sense of “credulity about him” which is described as “orgulous” (33), or haughty, further suggests his propensity towards exaggeration. The narrator’s mention of this “credulity” is therefore ironic. Such descriptions of Orlando’s ancestry certainly prefigure the adventure that will unfold during his lifetime, and so his future is inadvertently brought into the text along with his past and present. There is also an

image near the beginning of the novel that further suggests the influence of ancestry on Orlando:

Were not the bars of darkness in the room, and the yellow pools which chequered the floor, made by the sun falling through the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the windows? Orlando stood now in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard. When he put his hand on the window-sill to push the window open, it was instantly coloured red, blue and yellow like a butterfly's wing. Thus, those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself. (11-12)

Orlando is situated within and shrouded by this emblem of ancestry and genealogy, indicating the influence they hold over the image of a person. No doubt Orlando's current identity is defined somewhat by the values, the deeds and even the vices of his forebears. The image above is a physical manifestation of this fact. The influence of Orlando's ancestry mirrors that of Vita Sackville-West's. Orlando, like Sackville-West, is a prolific writer, and at the beginning of the novel he is writing "Aethelbert: A Tragedy in Five Acts" (13). According Sandra M. Gilbert, this work recalls *Gorboduc*, "the five-act tragedy inspired by early English history" (234) performed in 1561 and written by Sackville-West's ancestor Thomas Sackville, first Earl of Dorset. The sixth Earl, Charles Sackville, was "a poet and literary patron" (Lee, VW 487). It appears that Vita's literary inclinations were foreshadowed by those of her predecessors just as Orlando's ancestors prefigured the exoticism and adventure that permeate his own life.

That elements of Vita's own life and family history permeate Woolf's novel is indisputable, and Lee states that Woolf "would always associate Vita with her house and ancestry: it was as much the inspiration for *Orlando* as Vita as herself" (487). That Orlando is a prolific writer is firm evidence of his connection with Vita, as is his sexual ambivalence. Lee also mentions "the destructive and demanding presence" (487) of Vita's mother and the impact it had on her:

Vita's dark personality—her fatalism, her narcissism, her love of solitude, and her susceptibility to passionate relationships—

were shaped by her painful love-affair with the self-pitying, temperamental mother. (488)

Regarding Orlando, the fact that “sights disturbed him, like that of his mother” (O 12) and that “he would steal away” to “his attic room and there lunge and plunge and slice the air with his blade” (11) is evidence of a connection to Vita. In Chapter 3 of the novel, another of Vita’s female ancestors is referred to in the novel, placed anachronistically in terms of time and place in Orlando’s own timeline, and therefore Vita’s as well. The instance of this woman’s introduction to the reader follows the conferring of the title of Duke upon Orlando in Constantinople, before his transformation into a woman. He is found in the second of two slumbers from which he does not rise for a great period of time. During this, his secretaries examine certain papers in his possession, coming across documentation on which the woman’s name is written:

It was nothing less, indeed, than a deed of marriage, drawn up, signed, and witnessed between his Lordship, Orlando, Knight of the Garter, etc., etc., etc., and Rosina Pepita, a dancer, father unknown, but reputed a gipsy, mother also unknown but reputed a seller of old iron in the market-place over against the Galata Bridge. (94)

To add this Rosina Pepita into the narrative in this way is indicative of Woolf’s beguiling and fantastical address of time, ancestry, and identity in her novel. This is because she is named after Vita Sackville-West’s maternal grandmother, Josefa Duran y Ortega de la Oliva, who Michael V. Stevens says was a “Spanish gipsy dancer known as Pepita” who Vita’s maternal grandfather Lionel Sackville-West met in 1852 and “immediately fell in love with” (14). The confluence of characters who mirror a variety of Vita’s ancestors is a means of elucidating for the reader that Orlando is an amalgamation of qualities passed onto him from numerous sources. As a result, he mirrors these sources. Lee elaborates:

Orlando’s history plays with the notion that genetic inheritance can be pooled (just as sexual orientations can be crossed) in the identity of one person. So, after living for generations, Orlando is both an exceptional individual, and the summation of her whole family’s history. (VW 50)

There is a moment in which the protagonist recalls Thomas Sackville,⁵ of whom Queen Elizabeth was a clear admirer, as she is of Orlando:

For the old woman loved him. And the Queen, who knew a man
when she saw one, though not, it is said, in the usual way,
plotted for him a splendid ambitious career. Lands were given
him; houses assigned him. He was to be the son of her old age;
the limb of her infirmity; the oak tree on which she lent her
degradation. (O 19)

In addition to this, Thomas Sackville is said to have “abandoned poetry for politics for which, by birth and by talent, he was eminently fitted” (Stevens 13). Orlando does make a move to politics as well, but differs from Thomas Sackville in that he remains poetically inclined, thus mirroring Vita. When Orlando marries Rosina Pepita he parallels Lionel Sackville-West. Stevens notes how Vita’s “ancestry is somewhat unusual” given how she is descended from a British Earl, i.e. Thomas Sackville, “on her father’s side”, and how “on her mother’s side she is descended from a Spanish gipsy” (13). It is interesting how the discovery of the marriage document almost immediately precedes Orlando’s transformation into a woman. The marriage of Orlando to Rosina Pepita and this subsequent change seems representative of how the more exotic and feminine side of Vita’s ancestry influenced her own existence, though the transformation will be discussed later in this chapter. Vita and her ancestors, both male and female, collapse into the singular form that is Orlando. In a diary entry from 1923 Woolf writes, “I trace her [Vita’s] passions five hundred years back, and they become romantic to me” (*Selected Diaries (SD)* 161), thus implying the pertinence of ancestry in the formulation of one’s personality. Woolf uses the character of Orlando in order to illustrate this.

References to ancestry also occur in Chapter 2 of the novel after Orlando awakens from a seven-day sleep induced by the effects of the Russian princess Sasha’s betrayal and our protagonist’s exile from court. He is seen “perambulating” (49) his “home in Blackfriars” (119), described as having “three hundred and sixty five bedrooms” (79), therefore bearing great similarity to and clearly being inspired by Knole, the estate given to Thomas Sackville by Queen Elizabeth I in 1556 (Stevens 14) and which formed a large part of Vita Sackville-West’s life:

⁵ Stevens also notes that Thomas Sackville “was cousin to Queen Elizabeth through the Boleyn family” (13).

Then there was the great house, built over four acres, like a gigantic, palatial Oxford college, with (legend had it) seven courts, fifty-two staircases and 365 rooms. Knole was Vita's first passion (she grew up there) and her greatest lost love (she could not inherit as she was a woman). The first gift Virginia received from Vita after their first meeting was a copy of *Knole and the Sackvilles*. And she would always associate Vita with her home ancestry: it was as much the inspiration for *Orlando* as Vita was herself (Lee, VW 487).

The house is important to *Orlando* not only because of its relevance to the biographical status of the novel. Its appearance definitely recalls Vita, as well as "the famous family court case over her father's claim to the house, when Vita was eighteen" (487), which her parents won. After transforming into a woman and returning to England, Orlando also endures legal battles regarding the right to her estate:

No sooner had she returned to her home in Blackfriars than she was made aware by a succession of Bow Street runners and other grave emissaries from the Law Courts that she was a party to three major suits which had been preferred against her during her absence, as well as innumerable minor litigations, some arising out of, others depending on them. The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one Rosina Pepita, a dancer; and had had by her three sons, which sons declaring that their father was deceased, claimed that all his property descended to them. Such grave charges as these would, of course, take time and money to dispose of. All her estates were put in Chancery and her titles pronounced in abeyance while the suits were under litigation. Thus it was in a highly ambiguous condition, uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity, that she posted down to her country seat, where, pending the legal judgment, she had the Law's permission to reside in a state of incognito or incognita, as the case might turn out to be. (O 119-120)

The correspondence between this episode and the legal struggles of Vita's parents further emphasise the biographical nature of *Orlando*, though once again, Orlando is aligned not just with Vita, but with her ancestors as well. The mention of the "ambiguous condition" also calls attention to Orlando's equally undecided and problematic identity. In addition, the house's aforementioned contents, despite the uncertainty of their exact number, correspond

quite well with Woolf's idea of the "luminous halo" (MF 120). The 365 rooms signify the house's relation to a year, each room representing a day.⁶ No two rooms would ever be exactly the same, despite the similarities they may share in terms of function or layout, and no person's experience of that room would be exactly the same as that of any other, or any other person's for that matter. In the same manner, no person's experience of a specific day will ever be the same. As an environment whose contents are mutable hosts to the daily experiences of its inhabitants, the house resembles a unit of time whose own constituents are also varying, and which encloses the same inhabitants throughout their lives. There is a moment towards the end of the novel in which Orlando fancies that

hundreds and thousands of times as she had seen them [the rooms], they never looked the same twice, as if so long a life as theirs had stored in them a myriad moods which changed with winter and summer, bright weather and dark, and her own fortunes and the people's characters who visited them. (218)

That the house is "haunted by a variety of ghosts" (49) is immediately suggestive of the influence and endurance of the past as well its continuation into the future. It becomes a symbol for the fluidity of time, as the present moment, the events of the past, and possibilities of the future are combined and centred round the protagonist.

The implications of the crypt scene in *Orlando*

Orlando performs various solitary actions which are indicative of his preoccupation with the past, such as "pacing the long galleries and ballrooms with a taper in his hand, looking at picture after picture as if he sought the likeness of somebody he could not find" and descending "into the crypt where his ancestors lay" (50). The description of the crypt is pertinent for its allusion to the historical documentation of a subject:

It was a ghastly sepulchre; dug deep beneath the foundations of the house as if the first Lord of the family, who had come from France with the Conqueror, had wished to testify how all pomp is built upon corruption; how the skeleton lies beneath the flesh; how we that dance and sing above must lie below; how the crimson velvet turns to dust; how the ring (here Orlando, stooping his lantern, would pick up a gold circle lacking a stone,

⁶ This recalls *The Voyage Out*, in which Rachel Vinrace dies at the age of twenty-four after twenty-four chapters (see p47).

that had rolled into a corner) loses its ruby and the eye which was so lustrous shines no more. (51)

The act of burial is likened somewhat to a kind of false, or at the very least inaccurate, documentation of a person, as the person in question is shrouded in “pomp”, symbolised by the crumbling finery adorning his or her remains. That this “pomp” is built upon the “corruption” of the body illustrates an idea mentioned later of life being “founded on a grave” (51). Both images refer indirectly to the attempts of traditional biographers to monumentalise or aggrandise their deceased subjects, perhaps even in spite of any misdeed on their part. Orlando contemplates the hand of one of these skeletons, asking if it is “the hand of man or woman, of age or youth” and whether it had “urged the war-horse, or plied the needle”, or “plucked the rose, or grasped cold steel” (51). That the sex of the person buried is not distinguishable reveals that gender differences are dissolved in death, a pertinent idea considering the novel’s focus on gender. The moment mirrors an earlier one, discussed later, in which the hand of Queen Elizabeth I’s is described in relation to the many tasks she performed as sovereign.⁷ This suggests that one aspect of humanness can be related to manifold actions and occupations, thereby not being so easily interpretable. Orlando, due to his literary and imaginative inclinations, continues to search for more interpretations, but his “invention” is said either to fail him or to provide him “with so many instances of what a hand can do” that he shrinks “from the cardinal labour of composition, which is excision” (51). The problem with accurate “composition” in documenting a personality is once again suggested, and “excision” is revealed to be an inescapable reality for writers. Woolf raises the point that a writer will often be forced to remove certain information, thus somewhat limiting his or her account of the subject.

This moment is succeeded by more metatextual references to *Orlando* itself, as well as to the process of writing and the reader’s reception of literature. The issues presented during the scene in the crypt are, according to the narrator, “not matters on which a biographer can profitably enlarge” (52), so the supposed biography we are reading has opened itself up for scrutiny by emphasising the inability of biography to expand on inscrutable and abstract concepts, instead making room solely for concrete fact, the truth or accuracy of which is already debatable anyway. The narrator refers subtly to the “part” played by the reader in deciphering that which is abstract in a text:

⁷ See p74.

For though these are not matters on which a biographer can profitably enlarge it is plain enough to those who have done a reader's part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person; can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like; know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought – and it is for readers such as these that we write—it is plain then to such a reader that Orlando was strangely compounded of many humours—of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love, of solitude, to say nothing of all those contortions and subtleties of temper which were indicated on the first page. (52)

The reader has, since the beginning of the novel and perhaps even without knowing it up till this moment, been given the task of ascertaining the meaning behind any piece of information that has not constituted proper fact, something with which any traditional biography would be replete. That *Orlando* is already such a deliberate subversion of both a traditional biography and a realistic text means that it has, from the beginning, opened itself up to a great deal of scrutiny in its presentation of an individual's life. To write a book like this from the point of view of such a self-conscious biographer is a strategy undertaken by Woolf to convey explicitly the point that biography proper is as inscrutable, unreliable and interpretable a literary type as fiction. In fact, one proponent of fiction, "the novelist", is said to be the one "to smooth out the crumpled silk and all its implications" (52), an idea suggested later when "imagination" (84) is offered as a means whereby one can piece together the image of the subject.

An "imperfect recollection of his past life": the fragmented nature of *Orlando*

The narrator states in Chapter 3 that "it is with fragments" that "we must do our best to make up a picture of Orlando's life and character" (89), thereby addressing the fragmented nature of the text. In the earlier pages of Chapter 2 and at the beginning of Chapter 3, the biography is opened up for close scrutiny. After Orlando has been betrayed by Sasha, the biographer is "faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over" (47). The opening paragraph of Chapter 3 highlights this difficulty:

Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to

right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretation of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may. (47)

Newman uses this very excerpt when asserting that it is “only when” Orlando’s biographer is “forced to confront what is patently beyond his ability to describe, that his industry begins to waver and the complexity of his subject [begins to] emerge” (72). She also states that “such an unseemly capitulation to doubt disparages the biographer’s skill and must be quickly cast aside” (72-73), and the last sentence of the above excerpt attests to the biographer compensating for this apparent “inability” to describe events at this point. Irony is present in the very first sentence of this passage, which contradicts what Woolf implies in the scenario of “the widow and the friends” (AB 120).⁸ Her point is that it is the tendency of the traditional biographer not “to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth” (O 47). Woolf has asserted that this would not necessarily be the fault of the biographer, but by implying in *Orlando* that biographers are constant in telling the truth she is really highlighting the dubiousness of this claim. Newman states:

The compunctions that are meant to impugn the biographer’s wisdom strongly resemble the reservations Woolf herself expresses regarding the unreliable procedures of the new biographers. Though it is comically enlarged, the dilemma that confounds Orlando’s biographer is universal and Woolf reminds us yet again how difficult it is to accommodate the intangible essence of a life to the firm factuality of scholarship. (73)

In addition, the placement of the above excerpt from *Orlando* renders not only the preceding chapter of *Orlando* retrospectively unreliable, but the rest of the novel as well. In admitting, however honestly, that there is unreliable information in the text, the biographer has already tainted the reader’s reception of *Orlando* as a wholly accurate and truthful documentation of someone’s life. The events of Chapter 1 become especially dubious in their accuracy. The effects of Sasha’s betrayal are exacerbated by numerous factors, which are mainly the result

⁸ See p5.

of Orlando's rejection of his betrothed, Lady Margaret O'Brien O'Dare O'Reilly Tyrconnel, who is "by birth one of the Irish Desmonds" (23). Orlando is "exiled from Court" and "in deep disgrace" with the "justly enraged" house of Desmond, whose chagrin presents a difficulty for the English King, James I, who has had "trouble enough with the Irish not to relish this further addition" (47). It is these factors that affect Orlando's transition into what seems like a state of catatonia, since he does not "show any sign of life for seven whole days" (47). The starting point for this state is given as Saturday the 18th of June, an oddly specific designation in a passage where the narrative has proven itself unreliable by revealing a moment in its protagonist's life that is "dark, mysterious, and undocumented" (47). Perhaps, by offering this specific date, the biographer is giving the reader false hope for an accurate account of events, contradicting his explication of the unreliability we are now encountering.

It seems that biography presents the reader with information that ranges from specific to speculative, the latter evinced by the mention of "volumes" of work "written in interpretation of it" (47). Orlando's "imperfect recollection of his past life" (48), which occurs after he wakes, is what renders the novel's first chapter unreliable. His memory has been affected. Memory is personified in the novel as a "seamstress, and a capricious one at that", who "runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither", so that "we know not what comes next, or what follows after" (55). If one's recollection of events can be so capricious, then it seems all the more difficult to document it as fact. The process of writing it "may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting", so much so that "instead of being a single, downright, bluff piece of work of which no man need feel ashamed, our commonest deeds are set about with a fluttering and flickering of wings, a rising and falling of lights" (55). Memory, on the other hand, is also implied to be a tool in piecing together the aforementioned "fragments" (89). That being said, the fact that if "Russia was mentioned or Princesses or ships" then Orlando "would fall into a gloom of an uneasy kind" (48), suggests that some perspective is shed on the events of the first chapter, albeit one that is tainted by obscurity. The possible explanation for Orlando's lengthy sleep is deliberated upon by the narrator:

But if sleep it was, of what nature, we can scarcely refrain from asking, are such sleeps as these? Are they remedial measures—trances in which the most galling memories, events that seem likely to cripple life for ever, are brushed with a dark wing which rubs their harshness off and gilds them, even the ugliest and basest, with a lustre and incandescence? (48)

This excerpt contains the idea that historian or biographer might need to tone down some of the “galling memories” and “events” he or she recounts. Woolf seems to be justifying those occasions on which “harshness” is tempered and even gilded with “lustre and incandescence”. She is, however, still making the point that biographers and historians do employ a degree of artistic licence when their main task is to recount as accurately as possible the events of a particular history, whether it is a nation’s or an individual’s. The opening of Chapter 3 affects the recounting of Orlando’s endeavours during his ambassadorship in Constantinople. The narrator explains that “we have the least information to go upon” at “this stage of Orlando’s career, when he played a most important part in the public life of his country” (84). The narrator’s justification for why the text is thus limited is explicated clearly enough, but the means to repair this obscurity implicates the biographer’s attempts at clear documentation of history further:

But the revolution which broke out during his period of office, and the fire which followed, have so damaged or destroyed all those papers from which any trustworthy record could be drawn, that what we can give is lamentably incomplete. Often the paper was scorched a deep brown in the middle of that most important sentence. Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred years, there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through. We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination. (84)

Again, the biographer’s words attest to the reality of using estimation, speculation and even “imagination” in offering a fuller, albeit inaccurate, image of the subject’s life.

There is a point in the novel’s third chapter when, according to Gilbert, Woolf parodies “eighteenth century diaries and letters” (246), both examples of factual or historical writing and two “marginal unvalued literary forms” for which Woolf possessed a “passion” (Lee, VW 13). Arthur Ponsonby notes that the diary “is of course a very different thing from history, although some of the older diaries have been of great use in furnishing the historian with facts and giving him examples of contemporary opinion” (1). The diary referred to at this point in the novel is that of “John Fenner Brigge” (90), an English naval officer. The scene recounted is set in Constantinople during “a moment of great significance” (90) in Orlando’s career, the recounting of which is rendered unreliable:

For the conferring of the Dukedom was the occasion of a very famous, and indeed, much disputed incident, which we must now describe, picking our way among burnt papers and little bits of tape as best we may. (90)

The unreliability is exacerbated when the narrator notes that “details are lacking, for the fire had its way with all such records, and has left only tantalising fragments which leave the most important points obscure” (90). In the manner of a historian, as Ponsonby has pointed out, the narrator goes to another source, this being Brigge’s diary. This fragmentary nature of this particular kind of historical document is attested to by Ponsonby in his mention of “the incomplete and the necessarily restricted comments of the eye-witness” (2). Brigge’s diary itself is said to be “full of burns and holes” with “some sentences being quite illegible” (O 91). The fragmented format of the diary is exemplified by the narrator for the reader:

I found myself alternately praising the Lord that he had permitted...and wishing that my poor, dear mother...By the Ambassador’s orders, the long windows, which are so imposing a feature of Eastern architecture, for though ignorant in many ways...were thrown wide; and within, we could see a tableau vivant or theatrical display in which English ladies and gentlemen...represented a masque the work of one... (91)

The biographer follows the diary entry with the mention of a “Miss Penelope Hartopp”, also a guest, who carried “on the tale in a letter, much defaced too, which ultimately reached a female friend at Tunbridge Wells” (91). This source exemplifies how vague, partial and exaggerated a view of a specific person and event can be:

But the sight of all others, the cynosure of all eyes...as all admitted, for none could be so vile as to deny it, was the Ambassador himself. Such a leg! Such a countenance!! Such princely manners!!! To see him come into the room! To see him go out again! (92)

In comparing diaries and letters, Ponsonby notes the resultant restraints from communicating through use of the latter:

Letters may contain fresh impressions and personal confidences and confessions, they may be written in almost diary form, but the consciousness in the writer of an immediate recipient

exercises a restraint on the author and produces a certain sort of self-consciousness which may have been entirely absent from the pages of a diary. Moreover rarely if ever are they found in the regular and complete sequence of a diary. Every one writes letters, but a very small percentage of them are readable to anyone but the recipient. (2)

Orlando, an already disputable historical account, is deliberately rendered more imperfect with the inclusion of sources whose limited nature is typical of their form and whose contents are partly missing due to damage. This fully exemplifies the inevitability of a historical account being somewhat imperfect in its documentation, no matter how great the efforts of the biographer or historian to source as much information as possible. A point is made throughout the novel that historical writing, whatever the form it takes, still constitutes a blend of fact and creativity, or rather the speculative filling of gaps, albeit for various reasons. The fragmented nature of a text is one such reason, but there is also the matter of the writer feeling the need to embellish his descriptions, as will be discussed in the next section.

“Nature has tricks of her own”: literature, psychological experience and character

Orlando is said to be “afflicted with a love of literature”, this preoccupation being turned by the biographer into a disease that is said “to substitute a phantom for reality” (O 52). The implication is that the affliction obscures Orlando’s perception of the world around him, or at least forces him to adopt an elaborative method of writing, as well as a somewhat blurred sense of reality. A pertinent figure in his literary development is the writer and critic Nicholas Greene, who is “partly based on the Elizabethan hack writer, pamphleteer, poet and playwright, Robert Greene”, notorious “for his envy of Shakespeare” (Gilbert 243). Nicholas, or Nick, is very critical of the literature of this particular period:

Now all young writers were in the pay of the booksellers and poured out any trash that would sell. Shakespeare was the chief offender in this way and Shakespeare was already paying the penalty. Their own age, he said, was marked by precious conceits and wild experiments—neither of which the Greeks would have tolerated for a moment. Much though it hurt him to say it—for he loved literature as he loved his life—he could see no good in the present and he had no hope of the future. (O 62)

His revelations about “the lives and characters of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and the rest” (63) leave Orlando dumbstruck:

These then were his gods! Half were drunken and all were amorous. Most of them quarrelled with their wives; not one of them was above a lie or an intrigue of the most paltry kind. Their poetry was scribbled down on the backs of washing bills held to the heads of printer's devils at the street door. Thus Hamlet was sent to press; thus Lear; thus Othello. No wonder, as Greene said, that these plays show the faults they do. (63)

Orlando has clearly created an image of these writers based merely on their works, his assumption being that there is a relationship between the standard of work written and its writer. This is a subtle commentary on how no literary work, be it fiction, biography or an amalgamation of these two types, can attest to the factors that catalysed its inception and production. In the same way that no famed literary work such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *Othello* bears proof of being written by a figure of high rank and proper behaviour, so no biography is necessarily the assured product of thorough investigation and devotion to the truth. Perhaps this is another reason as to why Woolf decries the "distinction between biography and fiction" that she mentions in "The Art of Biography" (120),⁹ since each constitutes a blend of the true and the invented, and neither is indicative of a scrupulous author. For Orlando, although he does not realise it, Nick Greene is perhaps one of the least scrupulous. That Greene has "a power of mimicry that brought the dead to life" (O 63) suggests an ability to hearken to past figures and document their behaviour, but in a crude manner. That he "could say the finest things of books provided they were written three hundred years ago" (63) reveals the limitedness of his own literary knowledge. He is clearly not a figure of much dependability, and yet Orlando pays heed to everything he says, particularly after reading a scathing critique of his own self and work by Greene:

It was so done to a turn that no one could doubt that the young Lord who was roasted was Orlando; his most private sayings and doings, his enthusiasms and follies, down to the very colour of his hair and the foreign way he had of rolling his r's, were there to the life. And if there had been any doubt about it, Greene clinched the matter by introducing, with scarcely any disguise, passages from that aristocratic tragedy, the Death of Hercules, which he found as he expected, wordy and bombastic in the extreme. (66)

⁹ See p5.

Greene's pamphlet, referred to by the narrator as a "very spirited satire" (66), is geared to undermine its subject, offering both a thorough description of its subject's aesthetic qualities and behaviourisms, and an obviously opinionated commentary on the subject's work. After its publication, Orlando retreats into seclusion, seeing "worthlessness" in every experience he has had up till this point, even claiming that literature is "a farce" (67). This terse claim encapsulates what is perhaps one of the most important points of *Orlando*, that no real work of literature is totally and utterly dependable. None of it is spoken from the most neutral point of view, or absolutely reflective of real life. Its factual basis is often distorted, its perspective is often biased, and a considerable portion of its content is often fictitious.

There is also the matter of literature's insufficiency in capturing character or psychological experience. This is further emphasised in Chapter 4 of the novel, when Orlando has transformed into a woman and returns to Knole from Constantinople. In the Chapel at Knole she beholds the prayer book of Mary, Queen of Scots. Gilbert notes that this book is in existence and can actually be found at Knole (250-251), further evidence of the biographical nature of *Orlando*. Orlando's psychological reaction to the book is questioned:

But what pious thoughts it roused in Orlando, what evil passions it soothed asleep, who dare say, seeing that of all communions this with the deity is the most inscrutable? Novelist, poet, historian all falter with their hand on that door; nor does the believer himself enlighten us, for is he more ready to die than other people, or more eager to share his goods. (O 122)

Proponents of fiction and life-writing are grouped together due to their defectiveness in capturing an experience such as this. While such a limitation may be unfair to the subject, it is also troublesome for the writer. A later passage indicates this with regard to the biographer:

If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin), had more consideration for their biographers! What is more irritating than to see one's subject, on whom one has lavished so much time and trouble, slipping out of one's grasp altogether and indulging—witness her sighs and gasps, her flushings and palings, her eyes now bright as lamps, now haggard as dawns—what is more humiliating than to see all this dumb show of emotion and excitement gone through before our eyes when we know that what causes it—thought and imagination—are of no importance whatsoever. (187)

Here, psychological experience is constituted by “thought and imagination”, which are two aspects that might affect and alter the outward behaviour of the subject, much to the biographer’s chagrin. Later in Chapter 4, Orlando’s encounter with Alexander Pope catalyses an epiphany that seems to contradict her earlier discoveries about Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. That these discoveries are thanks to Nicholas Greene, who has proven to be unscrupulous and insincere in his own particular brand of documentation, might have already rendered Orlando’s ideas of Shakespeare and Jonson inaccurate. While presenting the reader with a short excerpt from Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*, the narrator notes that “when we read” it “we know as if we heard him how Mr. Pope’s tongue flickered like a lizard’s, how his eyes flashed, how his hand trembled, how he loved, how he lied, how he suffered” (145). The point the narrator tries to make is that

every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life,
every quality of his mind is written large in his works, yet we
require critics to explain the one and biographers to expound the
other. (145-146)

The narrator jokes that “biographers and critics might save themselves all their labours if readers would only take this advice” (145). It has already been suggested that a writer’s work does not reflect his or her personality or circumstances, but this moment presents us with the idea that a literary work can somehow show evidence of its writer’s character. Perhaps it is that the information revealed to Orlando regarding Shakespeare and Jonson is more proof of their outward behaviour than their inner thoughts and experiences. These, like Pope’s, would have been better reflected in their fictional, and often fanciful, literary works. With this interpretation in mind, we can once again see how life-writing and fiction are dichotomised, albeit inadvertently in this instance. Fictional literature is seen as more effective in capturing the essence of character, while biography can only describe what is more readily visible. A moment later in Chapter 4 Orlando asks inwardly, “Was this life quite so exciting, quite so flattering, quite so glorious as it sounds when the memoir writer has done his work upon it?” (148). This is a direct reference to the limitedness of life-writing in its documentation of a person’s life, and its ability to capture the essence of that person’s character.

Historical tragedy is another form of historical writing referenced in the novel, signalled by Orlando’s work on “Aethelbert”. He is described as being “fluent” but “abstract” (13) in his writing, which is perhaps indicative of the difficulty in producing a historical

account without including some sense of creativity. Indeed, to be “abstract” might be very well be synonymous with including those “thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore” (12) and “that rout and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests” (13). These allusions to biographical writing in *Orlando* are conscious criticisms of the staleness and lack of creativity Woolf perceived in traditional biography, especially before the twentieth century. Mention of these “disagreeables” and the “rout and confusion of the passions” acts both as a dismissal and as a deliberate inclusion of descriptions of mood and physicality traditional biographers might have ignored. Woolf seems to be teasing traditional biographers, subtly questioning what “good” (12) biography might actually entail. Her narrator seems to imply that there is only one method in which a historical or biographical account can be written, i.e. one that is devoted only to the constant relaying of accurate facts surrounding the subject. To suggest this in and around a passage that refers to historical tragedy is to highlight the “distinction” made between fiction and biography in “The Art of Biography” (120). Fiction constitutes a greater tendency towards discussing the character of a human subject, an activity which would involve mention of more abstract concepts. No matter the subject and no matter how “fluent” the writing is, if there is any hint of the “abstract”, then the work tends more towards fiction. Orlando’s difficulty in avoiding a tendency towards the abstract in his writing is illuminated:

He was describing, as all poets are forever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course, he could write no more. Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces. The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre. Moreover, nature has tricks of her own. (O 13)

Here we encounter Orlando’s difficulty in realistically depicting a simple aspect of his own surroundings. A description of the natural environment is perhaps not the most important part of documenting history, but it must be noted that Orlando is attempting to be as realistic as possible, showing “more audacity than most” in trying to depict “the thing itself”. His efforts are insufficient, however, given the “antipathy” between literature and reality. Again, a

distinction is made, and there seems to be no possibility of a fusion between the two. The mention of nature and its “tricks” is actually a subtle reference to what Woolf is trying to achieve in *Orlando*. The idea that nature cannot be too easily described in literature is similar to the difficulty of encapsulating a person’s character. Character, gender identity and psychology, all aspects of *human* nature, have tricks of their own as well, and Woolf tries explicitly in *Orlando* to make this point in the characterisation of her protagonist.

The references to character in *Orlando* recall “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”,¹⁰ in which Woolf states that “novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes” (97), and for the biographer never to need “the help of novelist or poet” (O 12) suggests a need to dichotomise biographical writing and fiction. What is notable about *Orlando* is that Woolf has found a way to get around this dichotomy. Novelists have the licence to intrude upon the innermost feelings of their characters with no threat of exposing any hidden truths that might taint the image of people in the real world. Biographers have no such licence, revealing only what their subjects would want others to know. Victoria L. Smith notes how “*Orlando* was of such a personal nature that Woolf felt compelled to ask Sackville-West for permission to write about her” (59) and recalls the letter Woolf wrote to Vita in which she said, “suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its [*sic*] all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind” (SL 231).¹¹ Smith raises an important aspect of Woolf’s characterisation of Vita Sackville-West as a fantastical character rather than a real person:

[*Orlando*] addresses a culture—one that allows published lesbian representation to be fantastical while real (in the sense that *Orlando* is about Vita Sackville-West), but not realistic as is Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, the infamous lesbian novel published and banned the same year in England. *Orlando* addresses a culture that can allow a kind of (compensatory) fantasy of Sackville-West as Orlando but will not tolerate overt (that is, readily apprehensible), “inversion”, as lesbianism was then called. (60)

Smith’s assertion is that “Woolf’s public sapphic love letter to Sackville-West necessarily had to be a fairy tale, necessarily had to turn fact into “fiction””, since without “the fantastic elements of unnatural time” and the “unnatural sex changes”, *Orlando* “might well have been

¹⁰ See p4.

¹¹ See p50.

banned” (61). Such historical context is important to a discussion of why Woolf chose to write a fantasy about Vita rather than a straight biography, but her reasons for creating an avatar for Sackville-West are not confined to the fear of her account being scandalous. After all, Vita was open, albeit to an extent, about her sexual ambivalence, though the reader is now familiar with Smith’s assertion that for this ambivalence to be reflected in realistic literature would have been intolerable. Indeed, the “balance of truth and fantasy”, (Woolf, *SD* 237) or fact and fiction, “must be maintained so not to let the reader off the hooks of history and the real or to hang those she mentions too painfully upon them” (Smith 59). The avoidance of libelling one’s subjects is pertinent to Woolf’s autobiographical agenda in *To the Lighthouse*, given her creation therein of avatars for herself and her family.¹² With regard to *Orlando*, one can detect a concern for writing as realistically as possible without exposing too much information about such sources as Vita Sackville-West. That being said, there is still the matter of Woolf’s wish to subvert biographical norms in the novel. It is in the same letter to which Smith refers in her article that Woolf also claims that she “could revolutionise biography in a night” (*SL* 231).¹³ Smith also notes how “this new biography produces the substance of truth in the sense that a fictionalized Vita (as Orlando) reveals essential aspects of her character that a factual biographer might not” (59). These last two quotations illustrate Woolf’s intention to produce “a fusion of the substance of truth and the artistry of fiction” (59).

The ambivalent figure of Queen Elizabeth I

History itself is also on the narrator’s agenda, signalled by the physical description of Queen Elizabeth upon her first appearance in the narrative. As happens at various moments in the novel, a single body part is described in order to determine the full character of a person. At this moment Orlando, bowing before Elizabeth, can see “no more of her than her ringed hand” (16).¹⁴ It is through the description of this hand that various aspects of Elizabeth’s character are expounded:

It was a memorable hand; a thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or sceptre; a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand; a commanding hand, too; a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; a hand he guessed, attached to an old

¹² See pp100-104.

¹³ See p50.

¹⁴ See pp61-62.

body that smelt like a cupboard in which furs are kept in camphor; which body was yet caparisoned in all sorts of brocades and gems, and held itself very upright though perhaps in pain from sciatica; and never flinched though strung together by a thousand fears (17)

From one glance at Elizabeth's hand, Orlando and the reader have ascertained numerous aspects of her character, from her declining health to her role as commander, her ultimate and even dangerous authority over England, her excessive wealth, and lastly her paranoia and vulnerability due to plots against her. In spite of her short-lived appearance in the novel, Elizabeth I is actually crucial to *Orlando* due to her role as both a historical figure and as a woman in fifteenth to sixteenth century England. She has always been a figure of controversy and has effected various multifaceted interpretations of her character and her role in political, military, and women's history. According to Susan Doran, many historians "share the preoccupation with Elizabeth's gender", tending to emphasise "the problems she faced as a female ruler in the patriarchal sixteenth century and the ways she attempted to circumvent them" (29). Indeed, it seems Elizabeth's role as queen was heavily informed by masculine and patriarchal imagery and terminology. Doran mentions how throughout her reign, Elizabeth "claimed the same prerogatives as her male predecessors, adopted the same visual imagery and mottos on her coinage and participated in traditional royal rituals, adapting them where necessary to suit a female monarch" (31). Such actions suggest how Elizabeth wished to emphasise the equality she shared with her predecessors regardless of their gender, though the adaptation of "traditional royal rituals" to suit "a female monarch" might merely have been for practical purposes. That being said, a wish to emphasise equality could only have arisen from a need to subdue qualms about there being a woman on the throne, and the aforementioned prerogatives, imagery and mottos would have served as reminders of Elizabeth's "male predecessors", thus rendering her more comparable to them than to her most recent (and female) predecessor, Mary Tudor. That Mary's reign was, according to Retha Warnicke, "marked by harvest failure, epidemics and military humiliation" and that in this era "females, whether married or single, were viewed as emotional and libidinous, incapable of autonomous political action and biologically inferior to males" (30) were two factors that would have left English citizens uneasy about Elizabeth's accession. What Elizabeth adopted, possibly as a means to try and alleviate this unease, was a confluence of both masculine and feminine qualities. Doran hints at this confluence when she says

writers today should really stop making simplistic assertions that Elizabeth capitalised on her 'feminine characteristics' to secure obedience and achieve her goals in statecraft. Like her father, Elizabeth displayed a mixture of radiating charm and unpredictable rages; like him, too, she demanded to be the centre of attention and enjoyed the flattery of courtiers (even if she had the intelligence to see through it). Unlike Henry VIII, though, she was immensely loyal to those she trusted, and men soon realised that they could present her with unwelcome advice without risking their necks. (32)

This is evidence of Elizabeth I adopting characteristics associated both with a man, her father, and with women. Knowledge of Elizabeth's sexual ambivalence becomes a pertinent talking point after Orlando's transformation, which is discussed later, particularly due to the way it relates to the intertwined topics of gender and history in the novel.

Sexual politics and gender representation in *Orlando*

Gender and sexuality are under constant scrutiny in *Orlando*, and descriptions of gender are part of Woolf's biographical agenda within the novel. Herta Newman addresses the connection between these topics within the novel:

Framed in fantasy, Orlando's life offers countless instances of biographical impasse. The astonishing sex change which he undergoes some half-way through the narrative is clearly the most provocative of these human mysteries. Here [as elsewhere in the novel] Woolf is determined not only to expose the inadequacy of biography, but to assert some home-truths regarding human sexuality. (73)

Woolf's narrator compares the biographer in his mission to produce a work to "the mother who bears" (O 12), implying the devotion that he or she apparently has to the surveillance and documentation of the subject's life.¹⁵ Of course, the idea of any truth or accuracy resulting from this documentation has already been called into question due to Woolf's assertions that biographers were usually coerced into presenting distorted depictions of their subjects. What the aforementioned comparison also does, as suggested by the narrator's use of gender specific pronouns, is allude to the issue of gender in the novel. That the biographer is characterised as a male is purely an example of Woolf using the male gender pronoun in

¹⁵ This is, however, a secondary reading, the primary one being the image of the literary project gestating.

referring to a person of indiscernible gender. She uses this pronoun in the same way in her other works, such as the “The New Biography”, as we have already seen:

He [the biographer] is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal. In any case he preserves his freedom and his right to independent judgment. (189)

The use of the male gender pronoun would have been usual in most of the literature written in Woolf’s time, but it still exemplifies the patriarchal assumption of literature in this era, specifically biography. The number of female biographers and female subjects of biography before the twentieth century was few. Victoria Glendinning’s “Biography, Choice and Gender” is pertinent here, due to the discrepancy she sees between men and women featured in 19th century biographical literature. Doubtless the “illustrious dead” that “professional authors” resorted to write about mainly constituted the “distinguished men” (64) she mentions. She writes about the shortage of women in nineteenth century biography, asking “what about women—great or not?” (65) and explaining that in order “to write about a 19th century or even 20th girl of the lower or lower middle class, you would have to write a novel” (66). She suggests reasons why only the lives of certain women might have been documented in biography:

Women, being on the whole less educated and excluded from public life, have left over the centuries fewer traces than men—unless they were in high social positions, or notorious for one reason or another, or were actors, artists or writers, or the wives or daughters of ‘great men’. (65)

There is a scene in *Orlando* where our protagonist, now a woman and back in England during “the reign of Queen Anne” (136), attends a party hosted by “a certain great lady, the Countess of R” (138), around whom sit “men and women of the highest distinction” (139). That “every man, it was said, had been a Prime Minister and every woman, it was whispered, had been the mistress of a king” (139) seems to indicate Woolf’s satirical demonstration of the discrepancy between male and female subjects of traditional biography. While it is “certain” that these guests are “brilliant” and “famous” (139), the reasons for their being so differ. The men are distinguished because of their positions of leadership, while the women are distinguished because of notoriety and scandal, emphasised by their being “whispered” about.

Again, it is not only female subjects in 19th century biography that were scarce, but female *biographers* as well. Female life-writing is subtly referenced in *Orlando*. A late episode sees the protagonist, now a woman, join a group of fellow women, each of whom tells the story “of the adventures which had landed her in the present way of life” (152). The apparent instigator of this small “society” (152), a woman named Nell, complains to Orlando a moment earlier about how she is “not in the mood for the society of the opposite sex” (151). The movement from this line to the description of the society (152) symbolises a wish on behalf of these women to navigate their own narratives away from any male influence or association. Their efforts seem, however, to fail, at least in this episode, due to the intrusion of a male presence and opinion upon their storytelling:

All they desire is—but hist again—is that not a man’s step on the stair? All they desire, we were about to say when the gentleman took the very words out of our mouths. Women have no desires, says this gentleman, coming into Nell’s parlour; only affectations. Without desires (she has served him and he is gone) their conversation cannot be of the slightest interest to anyone. ‘It is well-known,’ says Mr. S.W., ‘that when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other. When they are alone, they do not talk, they scratch.’ And since they cannot talk together and scratching cannot continue without interruption and it is well-known (Mr T.R. has proved it) ‘that women are incapable of any feeling or affection for their own sex and hold each other in the greatest aversion’, what can we suppose that women do when they seek out each other’s society? (152)

Lee recalls Woolf’s passion for “‘lives of the obscure’”, noting that “these lives are, mostly, women’s” (VW 13). The ability of women to share their life-stories with other women seems to be negated in this instance within the novel. The intrusion of a male voice into a context involving the sharing of life-stories symbolises male appropriation of and dominance over life-writing, exemplifying “the inhibitions and censorships of women’s life writing” which was “one of [Woolf’s] most urgent subjects” (Lee, VW 13). Elisabeth Jay explains that “Victorian women biographers laboured under the additional burden of establishing their right to the title as well as the worth of their subject” (ix). It was also “generally conceded” that novel-writing “might well be within a woman’s grasp because, as a junior branch of literature, it made no call upon a knowledge of rules laid down in classical antiquity” (x). Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, first published in 1857, is a pertinent and

“formative” example of the gender politics in Victorian biographical writing, since it was “the first-full length biography of a female novelist to be written by a sister novelist” (Jay ix). Indeed, Gaskell’s status as a novelist and Jay’s claim that in her work “she may be said to have created, almost single-handedly, the myth of the Brontës” might suggest that this work constitutes a less pure approach to biographical writing, even in spite of Gaskell’s “apparently simple, linear arrangement of the known facts of Charlotte’s life” (ix). The overall suggestion here could be that if a woman wanted to write a biography in the 19th century, she had to be a novelist, thereby casting aspersions on the ability of women to create a wholly accurate portrait of their subjects, opting mostly for fancy rather than fact. In *Orlando*, Woolf seems to be addressing all these forced gender-related notions. She has written a work that is both fanciful and written according to the formula of Victorian biography. Its narrator is a biographer who is male and its subject is of decidedly fluid gender. She is explicitly subverting assumptions made by proponents and scholars of - traditional Victorian biography, especially those regarding gender.

Woolf attempts to veer away from a heteronormative perspective on gender in her writing. Her own life and experiences definitely informed *Orlando* and its subversion of gender norms. She was a woman of ambivalent sexuality who grew up during the last two decades of Queen Victoria’s reign, and wrote and lived among such sexually ambivalent companions as Vita Sackville-West. In *Orlando*, “the gender binary, the main foundation of heterosexuality, is deconstructed” (González 75). Woolf highlights the fluidity of sexuality by presenting a protagonist who begins life as a notably eligible bachelor adorned with what Victorian readers and her own contemporaries would consider effeminate apparel. González observes that “the contradictory manly and womanly appearances of Orlando are resolved with the creation of an androgynous being whose gender is constantly mocked” (75). Of course, these issues could be safely consigned to a thematic compartment entitled “Gender” and that would be that, given how notable *Orlando* is for its “innovative treatment of sexuality and gender” (González 75). On the other hand, the narrator constantly raises the issue of gender in its historical and/or geographical contexts, thereby giving us an increased sense that this is a historical account we are reading, as well as the biography of a woman noted for her sexual ambivalence. In *Virginia Woolf*, Lee describes Sackville-West’s sexually ambivalent nature, saying of her “lesbianism” that it was “both known and hidden” (488), and illustrates how this “doubleness was acted out in Vita’s life as well” (489). She also has the following to say about Vita:

From the early 1920s she was well known in her circles as a lesbian, or (as Virginia always said) a ‘Sapphist’. She cross-dressed, she had lesbian and homosexual friends, she had figured in a lesbian scandal, and she had a reputation for passionate and predatory affairs, a reputation which lay behind Virginia’s comment after their first night together: ‘These Sapphists love women!’ At the same time Vita presented herself as a successful writer of pastoral poetry and conventional fictions, as a home-maker, a mother, a diplomat’s wife, and a conservative and traditionalist thinker. (489)

The mention of Vita’s cross-dressing is particularly important, since mention of clothing appears at numerous points throughout *Orlando*, not just for the sake of description but also as part of the novel’s historical agenda. *Orlando* begins with the words: “He—for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it” (11). The reference to the “fashion of the time” need not suggest that aspersions are being cast on the apparel typical of this period, but its insertion at this point acts as a means to counteract the extent to which Orlando is able to achieve a fully masculine appearance. This is not to say that our protagonist is being “mocked” (González 75), an assertion with which I would differ in this particular instance. Orlando’s masculinity, obvious according to the narrator, is marred somewhat by what was, at the time of Woolf’s writing *Orlando*, considered to be effeminate. I feel that if there is any kind of criticism being made in this opening line, then it is directed towards the need to contextualise norms associated with what might be considered masculine or feminine. Our first response as readers when confronted with the biographer’s subject concerns his gender, or how masculine he appears, how this masculinity is tainted, and how he fits into his own context as a result. The effeminacy suggested in the opening is exemplified later:

He tossed his stockings to one side of the room, his jerkin to the other. He dipped his head. He scoured his hands. He pared his finger nails. With no more than six inches of looking glass and a pair of old candles to help him, he had thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias in less than ten minutes by the stable clock. (16)

The meticulousness of Orlando’s manicure, the intricacy and lavishness of his outfit and the addition of a floral design all elevate the outfit to an effeminacy that seems to shroud our

protagonist in his entirety. These are the earliest of many instances in *Orlando* when a character's apparel is described in such a way as to raise the issue of gender norms in a particular era. We cannot read excerpts such as these and consider gender alone. By placing them within a historical context we are reminded that *Orlando* is primarily a historical account, and Woolf's agendas regarding gender *and* historical writing are intertwined. Woolf's era saw the flourishing of a new mode of dress that constituted a decreased dichotomy between male and female norms. Fred Davis says that "more overtly in the period since the First World War", during which Woolf wrote *Orlando*, "androgynously toned fashions have time to time held sway" (35). He also describes a notable trend in women's fashion that seems to mirror an earlier trend in men's fashion:

Since the industrial revolution at which point males came increasingly to fall under the visual constraints of a somber work ethic, the tendency, of course, has been for masculine versus feminine ambivalence in clothing to reveal itself almost exclusively on the female side as women have opted periodically—and during certain periods with great fervor—to incorporate into their personas insignia of male status and masculinity. (33)

Before the Victorian era, men wore more conventionally effeminate garments and accessories. Davis raises the point that "well into the eighteenth century the habit of cross-gender emulation in dress was, if anything, somewhat more pronounced on the male side in the privileged classes than on the female" (33). After the Victorian era, however, women began to wear more conventionally masculine garments. Such apparel consisted of men's hats, shirts, jackets and even trousers, "the quintessential male garment" (34). In *Orlando*, Woolf historicises gender and examples of its fluidity in practice as a means to call into question Victorian expectations and ideals. In addition, she is attempting to portray her subject, Vita, in the most fluid way possible. In doing so, she is subverting the strict, rigid and perhaps stereotypically informed documentation of human beings that was prevalent in Victorian society. Orlando is of no apparent age, the first hint at both the deliberate indeterminacy of his character and Woolf's experimentation with time in the novel. For Orlando to be wearing clothes that are indicative of his masculine physique yet feminine in their appearance reinforces the representation of his fluid, inexact gender.

There are further occasions in the novel when a character's gender is scrutinised. The Russian Princess Marousha Stanislovskia Dagmar Natasha Ilana Romanovitch, with whom

Orlando falls in love and who is afterwards referred to as Sasha,¹⁶ is introduced to us in a similar manner to Orlando, creating a parallel between the two. Our protagonist beholds, “coming from the Muscovite Embassy, a figure, which, whether boy’s or woman’s, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity” (26). Sasha’s nationality and the kind of clothing particular to Russia in this era are given to the readers as a reason behind Sasha’s ambiguous appearance at this moment. The odd thing is that while we might mock or ridicule Orlando and Sasha for their appearance, we do not realise that in their own time they would appear normal to others. They are not supposed to look ridiculous, and if we feel that they do then it is because we are reading *Orlando* from the perspective of an era far removed from that of the sixteenth century. The imagery in the passage describing Orlando would be recognised as effeminate in Woolf’s context, whose own era had succeeded, and still shared many aspects with, the Victorian. González asserts that “*Orlando* acts as a parodic contestation against the late Victorian sexual codes prescribed and enforced upon individuals in the first decades of the twentieth century” (75). If Woolf “took care to give it all the trappings of Victorian biography” (Raitt 19) then *Orlando* is clearly written, albeit subversively, with Victorian sentiment in mind. Woolf is taking care to cast scrutiny over Orlando’s and Sasha’s appearances, combining it, as observed above, with its historical contextualisation. She is initiating a discussion on gender, but by doing so in a work she calls a biography she is also subtly documenting moments where its fluidity might best be exemplified, and how the idea of that fluidity might be lost on those whose sentiments she is questioning and subverting. In fact, within their own contexts, the characters’ fluidity is not even considered defective, as evinced not only by the constant aforementioned contextualisation, but also by how other characters perceive them. Sasha, for example, beguiles Orlando at first:

The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur.

¹⁶ Orlando’s relationship with Sasha is based on Vita’s affair with Violet Trefusis, which was also a “cause of widespread scandal” (Raitt 79). Woolf suggests Violet’s inspiration for Sasha in a letter to Vita in which she describes her intention to “begin the chapter which describes Violet [...] and you meeting on the ice” (*Letters of Virginia Woolf* 430). Sasha’s androgynous appearance in this scene (quoted on p82) possibly relates to Violet’s own sexual ambivalence. She was married as well as Vita and Virginia. The destructive effects of Orlando’s affair with Sasha reflect how Vita’s marriage “suffered a [...] severe crisis during her affair with Violet”, Vita seeing “no way in which the marriage could survive”, but ultimately choosing “home and wifedom over an existence as an avowed lesbian” (Raitt 4).

But these details were obscured by the extraordinary
seductiveness which issued from the whole person. (26)

There seems to be a rejection of the heretofore unnamed person's sex as an issue in this passage. This one characteristic is rendered unimportant in comparison to the person in his or her entirety. At this moment, Orlando is seduced regardless of sex, and for a while the narrator uses the pronoun "her" (26) in this description. Orlando is soon seen to be uneasy about the figure's possible masculinity, particularly given her athletic ability and the appearance of certain features of her anatomy in contrast to others:

When the boy, for alas a boy it must be—no woman could skate
with such speed and vigour—swept almost on tiptoe past him,
Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person
was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out the question.
But the skater came closer. Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's,
but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts;
no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from
the bottom of the sea. (26-27)

This description is heavily informed by a heteronormative mind-set, no matter the era whose scrutiny it falls under. The rather childish notion that men are more athletically inclined than women is exemplified here, albeit ironically. The bodily and facial descriptions are suggestive of an abandonment of any notion of fluidity in gender. Androgyny is a concept completely ignored here, which is ironic considering Orlando's transformation, the vibrancy of men's costumes in this era, and the fact that this was a time when female roles were taken by boys in theatrical productions. Male femininity was clearly recognised in the Early Modern period, so many men would have "had a mouth" and "had eyes" (27) like Sasha's. Woolf is being ironic in this part of the excerpt, but she has also presented a character who exemplifies an amalgamation of typical male and female features. In creating a decidedly dichotomised view of these features, Woolf has actually highlighted how a person can embody both genders, thereby being androgynous. Orlando's image of Sasha as a Russian woman is also informed by what he "had heard" (33) about the lifestyles of men and women in Russian society:

He suspected at first that her rank was not as high as she would
like; or that she was ashamed of the savage ways of her people.
For he had heard that the women in Muscovy wear beards and
the men are covered with fur from the waist down; that both

sexes are smeared with tallow to keep the cold out, tear meat with their fingers and live in huts where an English noble would scruple to keep his cattle; so that he forbore to press her. But on reflection, he concluded that her silence could not be for that reason; she herself was entirely free of hair on the chin; she dressed in velvet in pearls, and her manners were certainly not those of a woman bred in a cattle-shed. (33)

One should first note that this is reported hearsay and obviously wrought with some level of inaccuracy and improbability as a result. Secondly, there is within this excerpt the odd suggestion that commoners of “both sexes” are somewhat indistinguishable from each other when compared with the aristocracy. That both men and women are, apparently, reduced to almost bestial status renders them equal in terms of social position, something history often notes is influenced by gender. More importantly, the image of women wearing beards, a marker of masculinity, seems to displace them in terms of gender roles. Women are the sole focus in terms of aesthetic appeal in this excerpt because it is Sasha to whom they are being compared. The assumption would be that the facial hair not only obscures their femininity, thereby rendering them unappealing not only in terms of appearance, but sociability and lifestyle as well. That Sasha lacks this particular feature of masculinity, and that she is accoutred in fabrics and jewels usually adorning women, seems immediately to confirm her identity as a woman. Again historical and societal notions of gender have informed how she is perceived and how she perceives herself. Interestingly, after Sasha’s betrayal, Orlando is described as hurling at her “all the insults that have ever been the lot of her sex”, which are, at least in the narrative, “faithless, mutable, fickle” and “devil, adulteress, deceiver” (46). He seems to be addressing her gender, her womanliness, more than her overall personality. She has been reduced in terms of her womanhood in his eyes, and is thus “mutable” (46), changeable. She is not one thing, not one type of woman, and therefore not one type of person.

Reception of Orlando’s physicality by other characters is also notable within the novel, and is similarly suggestive of the inexactness of gender. The first person to encounter him in the novel is Queen Elizabeth I herself:

The long, curled hair, the dark head bent so reverently, so innocently before her, implied a pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon; and violet eyes; and a heart of gold; and manly charm—all qualities which the old woman loved the more they failed her. (17)

The contribution of finely shaped legs to a man's attractiveness in the Elizabethan period has been discussed, but Orlando's are merely "implied", and only by his hair and head, suggesting that the attractiveness of one body part depends on what may be associated with the attractiveness of another. Elizabeth is looking at only some of Orlando's features, thereby getting an incomplete image of him. The incompleteness of one person's depiction of another is a fundamental issue in this thesis, and the *implication* in the above excerpt is indicative of how Elizabeth, and the reader, neither can nor do really *know* Orlando. A part of Orlando's physique, i.e. his legs, that would make obvious his manliness is only suggested, and so the nature of his overall masculinity, or indeed his gender, is subtly rendered ambiguous for the reader. The "violet eyes" and "heart of gold" (17) bespeak softness, traditionally considered a female or feminine virtue. It seems once again that a description of Orlando evokes not just one gender. He is again depicted as both masculine and feminine. It is interesting that "all" these "qualities" (17) fail Elizabeth, not just the masculine, given that Orlando is still a man in this part of the novel, and is being received by Elizabeth as a man. This overall failure reads like a portent of Orlando's transformation later on, and of his fluidity. The male *and* female qualities fail because Orlando is neither just male nor just female. During an earlier encounter with Elizabeth, Orlando is described as "the very image of a noble gentleman", a claim followed by the interrogative phrase "but inwardly?" (18). Fluidity of gender and the unreliability of outward appearance are emphasised at this very moment. Elizabeth I has further moments of misinterpreting Orlando, referring to him as her "innocent", due to the "serenity about him which had the look of innocence when, technically, the word was no longer applicable" (18). There is a later moment where she reacts violently after discovering his inclination towards flirtatious and womanising behaviour:

One day when the snow was on the ground and the dark
panelled rooms were full of shadows and the stags were barking
in the Park, she saw in the mirror, which she kept for fear of
spies always by her, through the door, which she kept open for
fear of murderers always open, a boy—could it be Orlando? —
kissing a girl—who in the Devil's name was the brazen hussy?
Snatching at her golden-hilted sword she struck violently at the
mirror. The glass crashed; people came running; she was lifted
and set in her chair again; but she was stricken after that and
groaned much, as her days wore to an end, of man's treachery.
(19)

The smashing of the mirror has to be read symbolically of a wish to destroy the image it holds of Orlando,¹⁷ since it has shown to Elizabeth an aspect of his nature she might never have expected. Saying that such behaviour is indicative of “man’s treachery” recalls the idea of Orlando’s manly “qualities” (17) failing her. The use of the word “man” does not here denote humankind, which might otherwise be a possible interpretation. Elizabeth has clearly experienced a degree of betrayal by a man, Orlando. Through this betrayal it is also the aforementioned feminine qualities, such as Orlando’s apparent softness, which fail Elizabeth, since they have simply vanished. Therefore, Orlando has not failed Elizabeth merely as a man, but as a person of fluid gender, his masculine qualities acting out the betrayal, and his feminine qualities offering no aid and instead disappearing. This actually recalls the change in Sasha in Orlando’s mind after her betrayal, since the aspects of her womanhood he has instilled within his image of her suddenly disappear, and she is rendered duplicitous and less womanly in his mind.

“He was a woman”: Orlando’s beguiling transformation and its aftereffects

Of course, the most important moment involving an address of both gender and biographical writing in the novel is Orlando’s beguiling transformation from a man into a woman, a moment in which Woolf “posits a sexuality, which like character itself, is fluid and unconstrained” (Newman 73). Up until this point Orlando has been in a seven-day “trance” (94) and is presumed dead, and left alone, until being discovered by Turkish rioters who have risen “against the Sultan” (95). In introducing the scene of the transformation, the narrator once again addresses the biographical nature of the text:

And now again obscurity descends, and would indeed that it were deeper! Would, we almost have it in our hearts to exclaim, that it were so deep that we could see nothing whatever through its opacity! Would that we might here take the pen and write Finis to our work! Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried. But here, alas, Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth! And again they cry Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth! (95)

¹⁷ This scene recalls Mrs Thornbury’s remarks about hansom cab mirrors in *The Voyage Out* (see pp13-14).

Obscurity and truth seem to be placed side by side somewhat contradictorily in this passage, since it seems odd to try recounting an event that has been cast almost irrevocably under the shadow of “obscurity”. The inclusion of “Truth, Candour, and Honesty” could once again be interpreted as an example of the narrator’s irony. Woolf is once again attempting to posit vehemently that truth or fact is often manipulated in a biographical account. This moment also exemplifies the biographer confronting “what is patently beyond his ability to describe” so that “his industry begins to waver and the complexity of his subject emerge” (Newman 72), particularly since Orlando’s sexual fluidity is the most explicit example of his complexity. That being said, Woolf seems to be giving some credit to proponents of biography. That the novel’s narrator, or biographer, has not taken “the pen” and written “Finis” (O 95), instead choosing to proceed further, is a testament to his commitment to his work. The constant mention of truth in this excerpt suggests that the biographer is committed to offering the most truthful account of his subject as possible, sticking by his “first duty”, which is “to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth” (13). Any difficulty encountered along the way is not necessarily his fault. The biographer seems to compensate for the obscurity surrounding the nature of Orlando’s transformation, noting how inquests were made into the matter, a means to prove his attempts to use other sources for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of Orlando’s condition:

The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always had been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. (98)

In fact, truth, or the personification thereof, is written as a saviour figure during the transformation scene, presented to the reader in an allegorical fashion, during which three celestial figures emerge at the exclamation of “The Truth and nothing but the Truth” (95). These are the Lady of Purity, the Lady of Chastity and the Lady of Modesty. A conflict of sorts ensues, during which this “masque of three sisters” attempt to “prevent” Orlando’s “discovery of the change in her body” (Gilbert 246), or rather the “Truth” that Orlando is “a woman”. Truth is called forth by “trumpets” in this scene. Each figure possesses a wish not to

let the female Orlando realise and experience her womanhood. First speaks Purity, whose “veil descends” on “all things frail or dark or doubtful”, the suggestion being that womanhood constitutes weakness and something akin to unknowability in its being “dark” (96). Doubtfulness is perhaps the most pertinent of these negative aspects in the protagonist’s case specifically, given the undecided nature of Orlando’s gender. Next speaks Chastity, “whose touch freezes and whose glance turns to stone” and who, “rather than let Orlando wake”, will “freeze him to the bone” (96). The frozenness suggests death. Chastity is described later in *Orlando* as women’s “jewel” and “their centrepiece, which they run mad to protect” (108). It is also said that women “die” when “ravished” (108) of their chastity. The fact that Chastity would “freeze” Orlando “to the bone” (96), suggests a wish on her part for Orlando to remain unspoilt as a person, so frigidity is also a possible interpretation. If he is made unchaste after becoming a woman, then he might no longer be frozen, or frigid. Lastly speaks Modesty:

Virgin I am ever shall be. Not for me the fruitful fields and the
fertile vineyard. Increase is odious to me; and when the apples
burgeon or the flocks breed, I run, I run; I let my mantle fall.
My hair covers my eyes. I do not see. Spare, O spare! (96)

Modesty seems to be trying to prevent Orlando’s ability to reproduce, traditionally considered a fundamental aspect of a woman’s existence. She, Chastity and Purity eventually speak in unison:

Truth come not out from your horrid den. Hide deeper, fearful
Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that
were better unknown and undone; the dark you make clear,
Hide! Hide! Hide! (96)

That the truth of Orlando’s womanhood is able to subdue the efforts of this trinity is evidence of both Woolf’s feminist *and* biographical agendas in the novel. The dearth of women featured in the field of biographical writing before the twentieth century has been discussed, as has the open sexual ambiguity of women such as Woolf and Vita. Interestingly, Woolf wrote in a letter to composer Ethel Smyth, “I was thinking the other night that there’s never been a woman’s [sic] autobiography”, guessing that “chastity and modesty” might have “been the reason” (qtd. in Lee, VW 13). Woolf wrote this in 1940, an indication of a possible preoccupation with these stereotypical virtues and the obstruction they might have presented

against the position of women in life-writing.¹⁸ Regarding *Orlando*, the fact that Purity, Chastity and Modesty are defeated by the truth that the protagonist is “a woman” (97) is a means by Woolf to pull a female subject out of the constraints of both Victorian gender norms *and* Victorian biographical writing. Orlando is allowed, in this moment at least, to be a free woman whose existence is capable of being as freely documented as a man’s. A passage that follows the announcement of Orlando’s transformation reinforces its positive effects (though our protagonist’s sexual ambiguity is still evident, particularly due to the narrator’s use of the male pronoun):

No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace. As he stood there, the silver trumpets prolonged their note, as if reluctant to leave the lovely sight which their blast had called forth; and Chastity, Purity, and Modesty, inspired, no doubt, by Curiosity, peeped in at the door and threw a garment like a towel at the naked form which, unfortunately, fell short by several inches. Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath. (98)

As I have said, it is in this moment in which positive effects of the transformation are witnessed. Orlando seems unconstrained and unfazed by being a woman here. He is aware of the change but remains “precisely as he had been”, and shows a perfect memory by going “back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle” (98). The change in gender pronouns is significant, the narrator drawing attention to how “in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’, and ‘he’ for ‘she’” (98). The conventions of gender in and around Woolf’s era inform how Orlando is to be presented to the reader in spite of how Orlando sees herself at this point, i.e. as the same person regardless of the transformation.

¹⁸ Woolf also raises the concept of chastity in *A Room of One’s Own*, discussing its “religious importance in a woman’s life” (64) in the sixteenth century as well as her own time in order to evince its longevity in this regard. She also connects it to the position of women in literature:

It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles, himself a much-talked-of man) that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them. (65)

The aforementioned reference to Victorian convention need not be interpreted as narrow-minded or regressive. The narrator notes before the employment of the third-person female pronoun “she” how “the change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (98). This address of Orlando’s identity and the employment of the gender neutral pronoun “their” when referring to Orlando are both evidence of a forward-thinking and open-minded narrator. The use of the third-person plural suggests that Orlando is not just one definable entity, but an amalgamation of two or more, which is made explicit in the novel by her change in sex. “Their” could refer to “his” and “her”. The sentence taken from page 98 does hold within it a caveat of sorts. The fact that Orlando’s change of sex will alter his future is written so as to be skimmed over, but the gravity of this fact becomes more obvious later on in the novel. The change to the female pronoun is the first indicator that, while Orlando’s perception of herself remains the same, the outer world’s perceptions and descriptions of her will be different. A perfect example of the difference between these two perceptions is when Orlando is, according to the narrator, “forced to consider her position” (98). Her own actions are in contrast to what the narrator feels should be expected of a lady:

Young, noble, beautiful, she had woken to find herself in a position than which we can have none more delicate for a young lady of rank. We should not have blamed her had she rung the bell, screamed, or fainted. But Orlando showed no such signs of perturbation. All her actions were deliberate in the extreme, and might indeed have been thought to show tokens of premeditation. (99)

Weakness and indecision are expected of her, while she instead shows great resolve, even riding a donkey as a man would, swinging “her leg over it” (99), and departing Constantinople. It is not yet apparent to Orlando that her perception of herself is at odds with what others will expect of her. Before the departure, the narrator decides to “let other pens treat sex and sexuality”, wishing to “quit such odious subjects as soon as we can” (98). If *Orlando* is a biography, then the narrator is attempting here to dichotomise biography and fiction, the latter characterised by imaginative writing, therefore justifying any treatment therein of sexuality or the breaking of gender norms. This recalls Victoria Glendinning’s mention of the lack of female subjects in Victorian biography. She states that in order “to

write about a 19th century or even 20th girl of the lower or lower middle class, you would have to write a novel” (BCG 66), and that women,

being on the whole less educated and excluded from public life, have left over the centuries fewer traces than men—unless they were in high social positions, or notorious for one reason or another, or were actors, artists or writers, or the wives or daughters of ‘great men’. (65)

Orlando remains, after the transformation, part of the upper class and investigations surrounding her identity are still made. Regardless of her class, however, her womanhood is presented as a problem. As noted after the mention of Elizabeth spying Orlando with another woman, the protagonist’s womanising tendencies as a man are explicated enough in the novel’s first three chapters to be read as indicative of his rather voracious sexual appetite. Now that Woolf’s work has shifted to a more gynocentric point of view, there is a sudden dismissal of “sex and sexuality” (98).

The scrutiny of Orlando’s womanliness is symptomatic of the change in the world’s perception of her, and she becomes aware of how her change of sex has altered this perception. Up to the beginning of Chapter 4 Orlando has “scarcely given her sex a thought” (108), evidence of her own indifference to being a woman. At this moment, however, while she is aboard *The Enamoured Lady* and heading back to England, Orlando dresses herself in “a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore”, also described as “the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank” (108). The moment is symbolic, since Orlando’s apparel has in one instant determined her gender, her nationality and her class. There is a later excerpt in which Orlando’s switch to feminine apparel is aligned with changes in her character:

Her modesty as to her writing, her vanity as to her person, her fears for her safety all seem to hint that what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true. She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person. Certain susceptibilities were asserting themselves, and others were diminishing. The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us. (131)

Orlando's change in character results from the outward perceptions and expectations people might have of her now that she is more readily identifiable as a woman. She senses a transition aboard *The Enamoured Lady* as soon as she feels "the coil of skirts about her legs", realising "with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position" (108). This "start" is "not the kind that might have been expected", this kind being one caused "simply and solely by the thought of her chastity and how she could preserve it" (108). Once again, Chastity is mentioned in the context of female experience, and the narrator states, "in normal circumstances a lovely young woman alone would have thought of nothing else" (108), a claim definitely informed by a conservative heteronormative mind-set. The moment is indicative of Orlando transforming into a socially perceived female being, by which I mean one whose character is determined by society, is based on ideas associated with womanhood, and is probably at odds with how Orlando perceives herself. Such an issue is pertinent to the novel's biographical agenda now that the biographer is faced with the difficulty of presenting a female subject to the reader, particularly given the limited position of women in Victorian biography. It seems that the biographer is caught between presenting two perceptions of Orlando, the first being the perception she has of herself and the second being society's perception of her. Of course, the first would be difficult for any biographer to fully comprehend and explicate for a reader, given how it is only for the subject to fully understand his or her real self. In fact, the traditional biographer might be countering the disparity between these two perceptions by highlighting the subject's deviation, if any, from social norms and discussing the reasons behind this nonconformity. These revelations about the subject would not necessarily be intended to shock the reader, a function of Victorian fiction suggested by Glendinning in the dichotomy she creates in "Biography, Choice and Gender" between the "distinguished men" (64) and artistic, well-married, socially elevated and/or "notorious" women of biography, and the "less educated and excluded" (65) men and women of fiction. Perhaps the biographer is actually caught in the middle of these two genres, trying to reveal in the realm of real-life existence that there are those who do not conform to gender or lifestyle norms, yet trying to cover up or prettify that conformity until it becomes more suitable for everyday readers. In presenting such a work as *Orlando*, Woolf seems to be bringing these two literary fields together in such a way that they depend upon each other to offer a perfect idea of the subject's character and psychology. The character of Orlando might be fantastical, but his/her psychology and personality are informed by factors that influence one's existence in the real world, such as ancestry, societal conventions and gender coding.

The reader is allowed a glimpse into Orlando's psychology in a work whose purpose ultimately constitutes an outward perspective on her life and character, and this is evidence of the fusion of actuality and fictional writing this thesis attempts to address. Orlando's insights into the consequences of her transformation are described, and it takes her "the entire length of the voyage [back to England] to moralise out the meaning of her start", the biographer then stating that "at her own pace, we will follow her" (108). A new story has begun, and despite Orlando sensing no fundamental change in herself apart from an anatomical one, the biographer describes her as

a child entering into possession of a pleasure or toy cupboard; her arguments would not command themselves to mature women, who have had the run of it all their lives. (O 109)

Now that Orlando's identity has changed, slightly for her yet fundamentally for onlookers, the biography changes as well.

An interesting aspect of the narrative after Orlando's transformation is how she takes on society's perspective when considering her womanhood:

She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,' she reflected; 'for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline. (110)

Orlando is considering herself from a viewpoint that is heteronormative, sexist, and not uncommon in Western society. It is indeed this viewpoint that informed the biographical tradition in the nineteenth century. Those women "in high social positions, or notorious for one reason or another" (Glendinning, BCG 65) would have been noted for at least one of the "graces" mentioned above, and the concomitant publicity they experienced would have allowed their names to be known. Orlando is now a lady of a high rank, and is conscious of both her womanhood and how she will be perceived in terms of it despite only "realising for the first time what, in other circumstances, she would have been taught as a child" (113). It is almost as if she is aware of being documented, and therefore forces herself into becoming the

kind of female subject expected of traditional biography. There is a point at which she and a minor character, “the Archduke Harry”,¹⁹ are said to enact “the parts of man and woman” (126), an indication that their conformity to gender norms is actually a charade. Orlando’s realisation echoes her child-like status at this point in the novel, and the biographer states later that “for all her travels and adventures and profound thinkings and turnings this way and that” Orlando is now “only in the process of fabrication” (124), albeit one that is against her wishes. A notable element of this process is the change in her perception of and interactions with men, impelled by a minor incident aboard the ship taking her to England:

Here she tossed her foot impatiently, and showed an inch or two of calf. A sailor on the mast, who happened to look down at the moment, started so violently that he missed his footing and only saved himself by the skin of his teeth. ‘If the sight of my ankles means death to an honest fellow who, no doubt, has a wife and family to support, I must, in all humanity, keep them covered,’ Orlando thought. Yet her legs were among her chiefest beauties. And she fell to thinking what an odd pass we have come to when all a woman’s beauty has to be kept covered lest a sailor may fall from a mast-head. (110)

Here Orlando considers concealing her womanhood. As a man, Orlando was said to have “a pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon” (17), and whose appearance had always been made known to others. As a woman, however, Orlando feels she must conceal these markers of her attractiveness. In this deeply self-referential parody of traditional biographies, Orlando’s concealment of markers of her feminine attractiveness attests to the great discrepancy between how men and women were documented and discussed in biography. Added to this, Orlando realises how her role in society will change:

And I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or sit among my peers, or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army, or prance down Whitehall on a charger, or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast. All I can do, once I set foot on English soil, is to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it. D’you take sugar? D’you take cream? (113)

¹⁹ This character is first introduced when Orlando is a man, as “the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorn and Scand-op-boom” (78) and is discovered to have masqueraded as a woman as a means to gain Orlando’s affection.

Orlando notices how she has transformed from privileged male to constrained female and how any respect afforded her will be determined mostly by that constraint. The first few actions described here, such as drawing a sword or engaging in violence, are examples of the aggression traditionally expected of men. For a man to behave like this is typical, but for a woman it is unacceptable. Victoria Glendinning does emphasise notoriety or deviation from societal conventions as one of the few factors that might have allowed a woman to be written about. The problem here is that a woman *had* to be considered controversial by the standards of her era and consequently ostracised in order to be remembered. The remaining actions described in the excerpt above are indicators of leadership and military strength. The occupation of a position of authority, especially monarchically and militaristically, is considered to be the privilege of a man. Queen Elizabeth I springs to mind once more, given her role as Queen in a predominantly patriarchal society in which, as discussed earlier, she employed the imagery and terminology associated with her male predecessors and exhibited the characteristics of both men and women when it suited her. Simply put, it seems that Queen Elizabeth had to disguise certain elements of her womanhood in order to be an effectual monarch. Susan Doran discusses how

historians and literary critics have also suggested that Elizabeth dealt with the problems of her gender by adopting strategies that turned her into the iconic Virgin Queen: first by deciding to remain unwed and second by fashioning herself into the Virgin Mary for propaganda purposes. (32)

Doran explains later in her article that “there is little evidence that Elizabeth rejected the idea of marriage as a deliberate act of will” and that she “on two occasions signalled that she wanted to marry a particular suitor” (32). That being said, Elizabeth’s appropriation of a virginal identity recalls the moment just before Orlando’s transformation, wherein the Ladies of Chastity, Modesty and Purity attempt to hide Orlando’s realisation of her womanhood from her. Modesty is characterised as a “Virgin” (96), while Chastity and Purity are traditionally associated with virginity. One might say that Elizabeth was trying to conceal the sexual side of her womanly nature, being very aware of society’s perception and concurrent documentation of her character and behaviour, and that Orlando is similar to her in this way. She is also aware of how she is and will be perceived as a woman. What Woolf has done is offer the reader a pertinent example of a sexually ambivalent historical figure who was conscious of how her womanhood was surveyed in a gendered and patriarchal society.

Purity, Charity and Modesty are referred to again considerably later in the novel, preceding the announcement that Orlando has been “safely delivered of a son on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o’ clock in the morning” (204). This moment is problematized a moment earlier when it is said that

here we could only wish that, as on a former occasion, Purity, Chastity, and Modesty would push the door ajar and provide, at least, a breathing space in which we could think how to wrap up what now has to be told delicately, as a biographer should. (O 202)

Gilbert notes that “here, as earlier in the novel, changes in the life of the body become occasions of anxiety and disturbance within the text” (261). Again, there seems to be a wish on the part of the narrator for a physical expression of Orlando’s womanhood, i.e. her ability to give birth, to be suppressed. That a biographer “should” wrap up this apparently delicate subject is a possible reference to the tendency of traditional biographers to problematize the depiction of women. There is mention towards the end of the novel of “the truth” that “when we write of a woman, everything is out of place – culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man” (215). Suzanne Raitt mentions how “one of *Orlando*’s most important functions is to unsettle expectations about the structure of lives, and to ridicule rituals such as marriage and birth, which appear to guarantee sex” (23). This is perhaps why the reference to the allegorical trinity and the announcement of the birth are separated by a two-page long digression from the events of the text, which begins as follows:

For after giving that sudden, violent start, Orlando—but Heaven be praised, at this very moment there struck up outside one of these frail, reedy, fluty, jerky old-fashioned barrel-organs which are still sometimes played by Italian organ-grinders in back streets. Let us accept the intervention, humble though it is, as if it were the music of the spheres, and allow it, with all its gasps and groans, to fill the page with sound until the moment comes which it is impossible to deny is coming (202-203)

Along with the absence of the trinity, this deviation breaks the biographical structure of this particular moment, and instead of fact, the reader is offered something abstract. Raitt states that “Orlando is not only a ‘great man’, the stuff of Victorian biography: he is also a woman, and biographical conventions shift unstably around her” (23). This particular moment within the novel presents an instance of unconventional biographical documentation which mirrors

the unconventional characterisation of its protagonist. Another instance which subverts one of the “rituals” mentioned by Raitt is Orlando’s marriage to Marmaduke²⁰ Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire, who is the avatar for Vita Sackville-West’s husband, Harold Nicolson, who Vita found out was homosexual in 1917, after which “the marriage readjusted to a dedicated companionship which would accommodate and survive their homosexual affairs” (Lee, VW 488). Not only do they become engaged “a few minutes” after meeting, and several hours before actually introducing themselves, but they are also attuned to each other’s sexual fluidity:

‘Oh! Shel, don’t leave me!’ she [Orlando] cried. ‘I’m passionately in love with you,’ she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously,
 ‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried.
 ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried. (O 174)

These interactions are no doubt humorous, and Raitt does state that “jokes about gender are used in *Orlando* for subversive purposes: to mock biography, mock history, [and] mock the rules and rites of Western society” (24), all of which are interlinked as we have seen. That being said, there is something deeply symbolic about the lovers’ mutual recognition and acceptance of each other’s sexual identity. It recalls the notion of the androgynous mind posited by Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*,²¹ though in a more explicit manner than in *The Voyage Out*. At this point in *Orlando*, our protagonist, now outwardly female, is definitely “woman-manly”, while Marmaduke, presented as a man, is “man-womanly” (AROO 136). The mutual recognition and acceptance of each other’s androgyny indicates a mental and spiritual cohesiveness between the two characters. While the union between Rachel Vinrace and Terence Hewet is “spiritual” (Kelley 23), the union between Orlando and Marmaduke is also outwardly expressive of the androgynous mind.

Conclusion

There is a moment in the novel’s fourth chapter in which one’s choice of apparel is described as being at odds with his or her possible sexual fluidity:

²⁰ Gilbert notes that “Vita’s pet (family) name was ‘Mar’, and she sometimes referred to herself and Harold as ‘the mars’, thus Marmaduke” (257).

²¹ See pp32-35.

Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex. And perhaps in this she was only expressing rather more openly than usual—openness indeed was the soul of her nature—something that happens to most people without thus being plainly expressed. For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (132-133)

The contents of this excerpt almost read as a metaphor for the issue with traditional biography that Woolf presents in *Orlando*. In the same way that one's apparel is an inaccurate outward indicator of a person's possibly fluid gender, a traditional Victorian biography has the tendency to present a limited, and therefore inaccurate, account of its subject. This is why Woolf's presentation of a sexually fluid character is so crucial to the novel's biographical agenda. Orlando's gender cannot be enacted for onlookers in one particular way, just as traditional biography cannot focus solely on one aspect of its subject's character. The "vacillation from one sex to the other" corresponds to the reference in the novel's sixth and final chapter to the numerous "selves of which we are built up" (212), and between which our protagonist and her paramour have also vacillated:

For she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand. Choosing then, only those, only those selves we have found room for, Orlando may now have called on the boy who cut the nigger's head down [a reference to the novel's opening]; the boy who strung it up again; the boy who sat on the hill; the boy who saw the poet; the boy who handed the Queen the bowl of rose water; or she may have called upon the young boy who fell in love with Sasha; or upon the Courtier; or upon the Ambassador; or upon the Soldier; or upon the Traveller; or she may have wanted the woman to come to her; the Gipsy; the Fine Lady; the Hermit; the girl in love with life; the Patroness of Letters; the woman who called Mar (meaning hot baths and evening fires) or Shelmerdine (meaning crocuses in autumn woods) or Bonthrop (meaning the death we die daily) or all three together – which meant more things than we have space to write out—all were different and she may have called upon any one of them. (213)

This excerpt reads as an implicit summation of Woolf's issues with the inability of Victorian biography to capture sufficiently the essence of character, since character is fluid, multifaceted and not easily definable. The narrator mentioning that some "selves" are "too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned in print at all" (213) reads as another subtle criticism of the biographical tendency to limit the information written on a subject. The restrictive nature of biographical documentation is commented on elsewhere in Chapter Six, which is actually filled with various arguments against Victorian biography. Two more passages demonstrate the conflict which exists between time and biographical documentation. Both also recall Woolf's assertion that life "is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" but rather "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (MF 120). In one, the narrator mentions how "the true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute" since "it is a difficult business – this time-keeping; nothing more quickly disorders it than contact with any of the arts" (211). The direct reference herein to the very publication Leslie Stephen edited is also an explicit criticism of the kind of documentation it constituted. The mention of the "arts" refers to those literary genres whose works constitute a more abstract approach to documenting character. The disparity between these genres and traditional biography is illustrated more thoroughly in the second passage, which reads thus:

It was now November. After November, comes December.
Then January, February, March, and April. After April comes
May. June, July, August follow. Next is September. Then
October, and so, behold, here we are back at November again,
with a whole year accomplished.

This method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare, perhaps, and the reader, if we go on with it, may complain that he could recite the calendar for himself and so save his pocket whatever the sum the Hogarth Press may think proper to charge for this book. But what can the biographer do when his subject has put him in the predicament into which Orlando has now put us? Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking. Thought and life are as poles asunder. (184)

If the “authorities” to which the narrator refers herein partly constitute the proponents of Victorian biography then by positing their opinions so bluntly Woolf is in fact deliberately satirising them. “Life” is clearly a desirable subject for proponents of both factual and fictional literary genres, but there is an apparent discrepancy between how to document it. Biographers are attuned to documenting a life in a stepwise manner, which might come into conflict with the abstract, fluid and unpredictable documentation of thought. Orlando has presented her biographer with a “predicament” because of her fluid and anomalous identity, an identity which would better befit the subject of an abstract piece of literature. Woolf’s presentation of such a fantastical character within the framework of biographical literature is an explicit means to show how life and thought, respectively representing fact and fiction, cannot be kept “asunder”, and must be fused in order for the subject’s true character to be revealed.

Chapter Three-

“Enriching Mutuality”: The Easy Confluence of Autobiography and Fiction in *To the Lighthouse*

Introduction

It seems fitting that we move from considering *Orlando*, a novel which subverts biography as a means of better exploring the personality of its subject, to discussing *To the Lighthouse*, which incorporates autobiography into its narrative. It is autobiography which, according to Roy Pascal, “offers an almost unlimited opportunity for the exploration of personality—not solely of the author’s, but of the people with whom he is intimately involved (162)”. Herta Newman seconds this claim, applying it to *To the Lighthouse* by asserting that in the novel “Woolf finds a welcome relief from the constrictions of biography in the freer atmosphere of autobiography” (83).¹ One might deduce that *To the Lighthouse*, as a partly autobiographical work, captures more sufficiently the personality of its subjects, but its status as a novel might hinder us from ascertaining its full relation to Virginia Woolf’s life and family. Pascal asserts that while “autobiographers accept certain limitations that are imposed by tact or by the laws of libel” it still “might seem that autobiography offers a better instrument for inquiry into the truth of personality and personal relations than does imaginative literature, in particular the novel” (162). Such a statement calls into question Woolf’s assertion in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” that novelists “differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes” and “go a step further”, feeling “that there is something permanently interesting in character itself” (97). It is perhaps not novelists who can document best the inner thoughts and experiences of a subject. A scale comes to mind, on which biography, the novel, and autobiography are ranked according to how effectually they portray personality. Biography finds itself on one end, due mainly to the unreliability of its proponents’ sources. Autobiography is at the other end, because the writer has knowledge that is more available to him or her than to any other, in spite of the aforementioned limitations and certain factors that Pascal attributes to novelist H.G. Wells:

¹ *The Voyage Out* has already partly exemplified the difference between these two genres with the two accounts given of Mr Pepper (see pp15-16). The first, offered by the naïve Rachel Vinrace, is speculative, biased and misinformed. The second is drawn from the ‘autobiography’ Mr Pepper eventually gives, but, being spoken from the omniscient narrator’s point of view, it reads more like a biography and is therefore still unreliable.

He was fully aware of the pitfalls besetting the autobiographer. He recognised that memory is faulty, and that it inevitably charges past experiences with a meaning they acquire only in retrospect, and he several times discusses the danger of deluding oneself about oneself, and of substituting an ideal self for the real. He knew too much that has to be obscured in the interest of living persons. (162-163)

Situated in between these two genres on the scale is the novel. The novelist has the ability to incorporate into a character whatever real facets of human experience he or she deems suitable, but is still confined by the ultimate ambiguity that fiction constitutes. He or she is neither lying nor producing information that is totally accurate. Pascal notes the difference between novelists and autobiographers in this regard:

Even if the autobiographer makes demonstrable errors in respect to himself and others, these still are true evidence of himself, and truer to human nature than the absolute knowledge that the novelist pretends to. (162)

With this in mind, one should ask why Woolf decided that *To the Lighthouse* should be an autobiographical novel rather than an autobiography proper. While Woolf might not have intended it, the novel seems to incorporate numerous factors of autobiography that Pascal mentions:

It can be shapely, with its outstanding “symbolic” incidents, its organic sections (the chapters), and a conclusion which may be that of fulfilled age or a situation at which the established personality stands collected and poised. With all this, it is free of the conventional exigencies of “literature”, it needs no plot, no spurious liveliness, and can devote itself truthfully to its theme, the slow assimilation of experience and emergence of a character. (162)

To the Lighthouse is replete with incidents that carry with them some level of symbolism; it is divided into three pertinent sections that move towards a resolution for various characters; it, like most of Woolf’s novels, is not plot-driven, and is more concerned with the psychological experiences of its characters through time; and there is definitely, at its “conclusion”, a “situation” at which certain characters, particularly Mr Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, an avatar for Woolf herself, emerge as “collected and poised” beings. The question of whether or not there is “spurious liveliness” in the novel is perhaps more dependent on the opinion of the

reader. Once more, however, one must ask why Woolf has transposed her own experiences to a fictitious narrative.

Avrom Fleishman states that “like every autobiographical novelist, Woolf makes a number of careful displacements in the time and setting of the action, so that it does not directly implicate her as a participant” (609). The implication of oneself and one’s friends and relatives is a risk always taken when writing an autobiography, and Pascal mentions how “the novel has apparent advantages that can be summed up as technical and may be rapidly be enumerated” (164). He explains that in the novel, “events occurring outside the range of the author-hero may be evoked and imaginatively re-lived, not merely adduced, postulated, or explained” and “the thoughts and hidden motivations of other people may be exposed” (164), without any palpable connection to the author’s background. It might seem as if Woolf is trying to escape whatever criticism she can by simply creating avatars for herself and not relaying the most factual account of her life. That being said, her prolific diary- and letter-writing attests to the very antithesis of this claim, as do her attempts at constructing “an autobiographical retelling of her childhood” (McCracken 59) in the form of “Reminiscences” at the beginning of her career, and “A Sketch of the Past” towards the end. Fleishman discusses how Woolf “completed no autobiography that can stand alone beside her name” and that *To the Lighthouse* “approaches closest to her personal experience” (606). He says, “*To the Lighthouse* remains an intensely personal novel, on intimate terms with the inner reaches of its characters and thus profoundly revealing of their originals, the members of Woolf’s family” (610). Pascal does also say that in the novel as a genre “the hero may be described from outside, or through the refractions of other persons, and thus become rounder and more clear-cut, while there is always a core of darkness in the hero of the autobiography” (164). Those figures who inspired characters in *To the Lighthouse* do retain some darkness, mainly because the novel has a function that is more specific than the representation and recounting of the author’s life and family. LuAnn McCracken mentions how “it is a truism” that “*To the Lighthouse* represents Woolf’s final laying to rest of the influence of her parents on her life – as Woolf herself believed” (59). The novel is, therefore, cathartic for Woolf. Newman claims that “this more self-conscious foray into the realm of autobiography is clearly therapeutic” and that in it “she exhumes the past to free herself from its enthralling grip” (83).

Woolf’s apparent avoidance of autobiography proper in *To the Lighthouse* also points to her preoccupation with the subversion of biographical norms, which she exercises

obviously in works such as *Orlando*. She “raises the question of identity again and again” in her fiction and asks how one does “represent the self”, and commentators “frequently extend the issue of identity to include the ways in which Woolf incorporates her own life in her writings” (McCracken 59). Their commentary is explained further by McCracken:

In such criticism, the connection between Woolf’s real-life experience and her imaginary creation becomes the focus of attention, not Woolf herself: curiously, her “self” drops from consideration. Yet in order to understand a writer so much concerned, as Woolf was, with her sense of “being” and how that connects with others, we should also consider how Woolf represents her changing sense of her identity as a woman and a writer in her creation and re-creation of experience, especially personal experience. (59)

This criticism is pertinent to our reading of *To the Lighthouse*, given Woolf’s transposition of her own self into the guise of certain characters therein, as well as the development of those characters. McCracken focuses her attention on “Reminiscences” and *The Voyage Out*, both of which Woolf wrote at the beginning of her career, noting how in the latter “Woolf distances herself from her subject matter” (60). *To the Lighthouse*, on the other hand, alludes to specific events, situations and figures in Woolf’s life, albeit in a fictional manner. The very setting of the novel is pertinent, as Avrom Fleishman notes when he mentions “a Christmas holiday trip to Cornwall” (606) made by Woolf and her husband in 1926, when she was completing *To the Lighthouse*. It was at Talland House,² which David Bradshaw notes was Leslie and Julia Stephen’s “holiday home in the small Cornish fishing town of St Ives” (xi), where Woolf spent her childhood vacations, and “it is well-known” that she “drew much detail” (Fleishman 606) for *To the Lighthouse* from these vacations. Vanessa Curtis mentions how Talland House overlooked “Godrevy Lighthouse” (26), so this is the place where Woolf drew inspiration. In *To the Lighthouse*, however, “Cornwall in the west of England” is replaced by “the Isle of Skye in the west of Scotland” (Fleishman 609), evidence that Woolf had fictionalised “her response to the place of her most powerful childhood memories” (607). This was not merely for Woolf’s benefit though, and Fleishman notes how “such minor distortions of factual detail are less the mark of fantasizing or evasion of the past than they

² One marker of Woolf recalling her experiences at Talland House within the novel is her characterisation of the guest Augustus Carmichael, who allegedly “[takes] opium” and “[has] stained his beard yellow with it” (*TTL* 35). He recalls one “Mr Wolstenholme”, a guest at Talland House, who “had only one characteristic—that when he ate plum tart he spurted the juice through his nose so that it made a purple stain on his grey moustache” (*SP* 73).

are choices made in the interest of arriving closer to the truth of personal experience” (609). This relates to Woolf’s own assertion that “facts must be manipulated” (NB 187) in biographical writing so “that the light of personality may shine through” (186).³ Newman remarks on the effects of the confluence between fact and fiction within *To the Lighthouse*:

Woolf moves closer to the true dynamics of autobiography, recreating now purposefully the life that is more often unconsciously transmuted into fiction. The familiar figures stand as signifying counterparts, illuminating both the life and fiction in an enriching mutuality. The synthesis lays bare the deepest sources of Woolf’s fiction, the hidden traces of her life, and that continual interchange between life and fiction that is her constant subject. (83)

Newman’s idea of “enriching mutuality” points to the interlinking functions of Woolf’s autobiographical and fictional agendas within *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf is undoubtedly using her own life as a basis for the means of catharsis. It should be noted that the eight Ramsay children correspond to Woolf and her siblings, Adrian, Thoby and Vanessa; and to her four half-siblings, three (Gerald, George and Stella Duckworth) from her mother’s previous marriage, and one (Laura Makepeace Stephen) from her father’s. That both the real-life and fictitious groups of siblings can be divided equally into male and female attests to Woolf’s clear attempt at creating a narrative reminiscent to an extent of her family history. Three of the Ramsay siblings, Cam, Prue and Andrew, respectively correspond to Virginia, Stella and Thoby, though these connections will be made clearer later in this chapter. Woolf’s employment of a fictional narrative is at one level a means for the reader to understand her experiences better. Pascal mentions Stephen Spender’s contemplation of “putting his experiences into the form of a novel” and his ultimate opting for autobiography due to its meaning “a more honest relationship between him and the reader and the author” (163). In addition, Woolf’s presentation of Lily Briscoe is an objective means for her to demonstrate, as in *Orlando*, the difficulty of coming to terms with and encapsulating personal experience and character, particularly that of Mrs Ramsay, whose effect on Lily corresponds to the effect of Woolf’s mother on her.

³ See p4.

“The influence of her parents”: the overwhelming figures of Mr and Mrs Ramsay

McCracken states, “if Woolf herself is absent from her text as a fully realized identity, the identity of her mother instead permeates this memoir” (64). Mrs Ramsay’s overwhelming effect on various characters in the novel attests to this permeation, and is simultaneously indicative of the hold Woolf’s own mother is known to have had on her. There are palpable similarities between Mrs Ramsay and Julia Stephen, the foremost being their charitable endeavours. Julia’s acquisition of altruistic tendencies was catalysed by the death of her first husband, Herbert Duckworth. Woolf explains this in “Reminiscences”, noting how

the effect of [her husband’s] death then was doubly tremendous, because it was a disillusionment as well as a tragic human loss. She had by nature a keen brain, remorseless of all insincerity and even too much inclined to insist that all feeling has an equivalent in action or is worthless. And now that she had none to worship she worshipped the memory, and looking on the world with clear eyes, was more scornful than was just of its tragedy and stupidity because she had lived in a dream and still cherished a dream. She flung aside her religion, and became, as I have heard, the most positive of disbelievers. She reversed those natural instincts which were so strong in her of happiness and joy in a generous and abundant life, and pressed the bitterest fruit only to her lips. She visited the poor, nursed the dying, and felt herself possessed of the true secret of life at last, which is still obscured from a few, though they too must come to know it, that sorrow is our lot, and at best we can but face it bravely. (32)

It is Mrs Ramsay who ruminates

the other problem, of rich and poor, and the things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow, or that struggling wife in person with a bag on her arm, and a notebook and pencil with which she wrote down in columns carefully ruled for the purpose wages and spendings, employment and unemployment, in the hope that thus she cease to be a private woman whose charity was half a sop to her own indignation, half a relief to her own curiosity, and become, what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator elucidating the social problem. (*TTL* 11)

This unceasingly generous character noticing “her grey hair, her cheek sunk, at fifty” (9) recalls Woolf’s mother, who died of influenza at age 49, “similarly exhausted” from her “life

of charitable good works and demanding household management” (Bradshaw 173). We realise the influence of Mrs Ramsay almost immediately from the various positive reactions of her family members and guests. The first one described is perhaps the most obvious, that of James, the youngest of the eight Ramsay children, for whom his mother is “ten thousand times better in every way” (*TTL* 7) than his father. A catalyst for this opinion within the novel is Mrs Ramsay’s assurance to him that the expedition to the titular Lighthouse, “the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years”, is “bound to take place” on the condition that the weather will be “fine” the following day (7) . His expectations are cut short by Mr Ramsay saying that “it won’t be fine” (7). Such an example of the contrast between his opinion and that of his wife is effective in initiating a conversation on the differences, and the similarities, between their particular characters. There is an interesting moment in *To the Lighthouse* which recalls ideas prevalent in *The Voyage Out*:

There wasn’t the slightest possible chance that they could go the Lighthouse tomorrow, Mr Ramsay snapped out irascibly.

How did he know? She asked. The wind often changed.

The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women’s minds enraged him. He had ridden through the valley of death, been shattered and shivered; and now she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies. He stamped his foot on the stone step. ‘Damn you,’ he said. But what had she said? Simply that it might be fine tomorrow. So it might.

Not with the barometer falling and the wind due west.

To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration of other people’s feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without replying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. There was nothing to be said. (29)

The first two lines of this excerpt are terse representations of the contrast between the parents’ outlooks. Lee elaborates on this contrast:

The marriage of Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth seemed to Virginia Woolf to present an archetypal pattern of sexual antitheses. Her portrayal of the Ramsays makes these contrasts so obvious, and is so characteristic of her treatment of the differences between male and female sensibilities, that the

grandeur and subtlety of the relationship seems all the more extraordinary. (NVW 117-118)

As in *The Voyage Out* and *A Room of One's Own*,⁴ Woolf uses the dichotomy between unswerving attention to fact and considerate attention to emotion to contrast male and female patterns of thinking. The above excerpt from *To the Lighthouse* attests to how Woolf's concern with the clash between fact and intuition permeates her entire *oeuvre*.

Mr and Mrs Ramsay do, however, "evinced similar characteristics of courage and endurance" (118), which recalls the relationship between Julia and Leslie Stephen, as recounted by Woolf in "Reminiscences":

Would any other arrangement of circumstances have so brought about the miracle? For she found one who had equal reasons with herself to believe in the sorrow of life and every incentive to adopt her own stoic philosophy; he was also of the giant breed, no light lover, no superficial optimist. She might go hand in hand with him through the shadows of the Valley—but, of a sudden, her companion became her guide, pointed on, urged her to follow, to hope, to strive once more. She could not so soon throw off what had come to be a habit of suffering almost, and yet his reason was the stronger, his need was the greater. At length with pain and remorse she, courageous as she was, more truly courageous perhaps than her husband, bade herself face the truth and realize in all its aspects the fact that joy was to be endured with sorrow. (33)

While Woolf's parents were similar in their philosophies, the kinds of endurance Mr and Mrs Ramsay represent are somewhat dissimilar. An apparently justificatory description of Mr Ramsay follows his response to Mrs Ramsay in the novel's opening:

What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness (here Mr Ramsay would straighten his back and narrow his blue eyes upon the horizon), one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure. (8)

⁴ See pp32-35.

Mr Ramsay clearly possesses a sense of hardiness, but this excerpt also suggests a degree of rigidity about his character. He will endure, but only from one particular point. The imagery surrounding Mrs Ramsay, however, is more suggestive of movement, or progress towards a certain end. There is a description of how “there throbbed through her, like a pulse in a spring which expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation” (34). It is Mrs Ramsay who incurs a sense of endurance throughout the novel. A good example would be her effect on Mr Ramsay at a point where he is locked in a moment of self-pity which ultimately turns into one of resolve:

He was a failure, he repeated. Well, look then, feel then. Flashing her needles, glancing round about her, out of the window, into the room, at James himself, she assured him, beyond a shadow of a doubt, by her laugh, her poise, her competence (as a nurse carrying a light across a dark room assures a fractious child), that it was real; the house was full; the garden blowing. If he put implicit faith in her, nothing should hurt him; however deep he buried himself or climbed high, not for a second should he find himself without her. So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent; and James, as he stood stiff between her knees, felt her rise in a rosy-flowered fruit tree laid with leaves and dancing boughs into which the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of his father, the egotistical man, plunged and smote, demanding sympathy.

Filled with her words, like a child who drops off satisfied, he said at last, looking at her with humble gratitude, restored, renewed, that he would take a turn; he would watch the children playing cricket. He went. (34)

Mrs Ramsay has catalysed her husband’s movement out of the house, and further towards the Lighthouse.

The passage above reveals Mrs Ramsay’s alignment with the Lighthouse and Mr Ramsay’s alignment with the island, represented by the first section’s eponymous window. In a letter to Roger Fry, Woolf writes

I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one thing[,] another another. I can’t manage

Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether its [sic] right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me. (SL 228)

This was a response to Fry suggesting a “symbolic meaning” (qtd. in Lee, VW 478) behind the Lighthouse. Morris Beja mentions how “there are many views as to the meaning of the central symbol of the Lighthouse” (21), but also states that “if the Lighthouse is clearly central, it is hardly clearly anything else” (22). My contention is that the Lighthouse's centrality is due to its status as a destination that certain characters within the novel need to reach in spite of the hardships that might obstruct them. This interpretation rests within the framework of the novel's thematic concern with endurance. If the Lighthouse is representative of a destination reached in spite of possible hardship, then a journey across sea seems the perfect analogy for this endurance, as the process involves movement towards a destination in spite of the waves' possible turbulence. Norman Friedman notes how, in the novel, “water imagery functions in its [...] capacity as destroyer” (161). There is mention, in *To the Lighthouse*, of the sea's possible “destruction of the island” (17), foreshadowing the events that occur in the novel's second section “Time Passes”, all of which affect those staying on the island *and* catalyse the movement of some of them towards the Lighthouse at the novel's end. Water and time are two ubiquitous motifs in Woolf's *oeuvre*, time having already been discussed, and are effectively combined in numerous instances. It is interesting that Rachel Vinrace's journey towards maturation begins with a voyage on sea. There is also Woolf's highly experimental later novel *The Waves*, whose title pre-empts the way its poetic form reflects the overlapping documentation of the lives of its characters. In *To the Lighthouse* there are numerous instances where water is aligned with temporal movement. The first is when Mrs Ramsay notes

the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, ‘I am guarding you—I am your support’, but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing—this sound which had obscured and concealed under the other sounds thundered

hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror. (16-17)

There is a later description of the house's dining room, in which there seems "to be order and dry land" while "outside" things are described as "waver[ing] and vanish[ing]", waterily" (80), so order and rigidity are once more aligned with what is closer to the window, and what is transient and fluid is aligned with what is nearer the Lighthouse. The sea seems, in the above passage, to represent both order and chaos for Mrs Ramsay, though the latter is emphasised. It is perhaps more the *threat* of chaos she envisions, and so the sea could be symbolic of life in that both are capricious, calm at one moment and turbulent at another. Such an analogy somewhat echoes Woolf's claim that life "is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" but rather "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (MF 120). The stepwise documentation of life actually suggests that the one experiencing it has control over his or her circumstances, while the idea of the "semi-transparent envelope" implies a sense of detachment between life and the subject. Life happens to and around the subject, effecting changes to his or her circumstances that may be out of that person's control. It is one's endurance in spite of these changes that seems to preoccupy Woolf, and it is Mrs Ramsay who best exemplifies this theme within *To the Lighthouse*. James Hafley says that while Mr Ramsay "identifies himself with the land and thinks the sea a destroyer", Mrs Ramsay "believes that life is the sea and not the land" (137), which attests to the idea that the journey over the sea to the Lighthouse is representative of a journey through life. The parallels Hafley creates are evidenced in various moments within the novel. There is a description of how "the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst" is "the view" which Mr Ramsay "loved" (14), and one later of him outside the house, "[stopping] dead", standing and "looking in silence at the sea" before turning "away" (39). It is also stated that "nothing would make Mr Ramsay move on" (33). All these descriptions indicate both the spatial relationship between Mr Ramsay and the Lighthouse and his rigidity. There is also a moment at which he sees

but now far far away, like children picking up shells, divinely innocent and occupied with little trifles at their feet and somehow entirely defenceless against a doom which he perceived, his wife and son, together, in the window. They needed his protection; he gave it them. (30)

This excerpt constitutes some reasoning for Mr Ramsay's alignment with the window. His wish is to keep his wife and child fixed at that point, since for him the window represents protection. Mrs Ramsay is more attuned, however, to the Lighthouse's importance. This is made clearer for the reader midway through "The Window" in another scene involving her and James:

Turning, she looked across the bay, and there, sure enough, coming regularly across the waves first two quick strokes and then one long steady stroke, was the light of the Lighthouse. It had been lit.

In a moment he would ask her, 'Are we going to the Lighthouse?' And she would have to say, 'No: not tomorrow; your father says not.' Happily, Mildred came in to fetch them, and the bustle distracted them. But he kept looking back over his shoulder as Mildred carried him out, and she [Mrs Ramsay] was certain that he was thinking, we are not going to the Lighthouse tomorrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life. (52)

The first paragraph of this excerpt seems to constitute a moment of contact between Mrs Ramsay and the Lighthouse, with the Lighthouse being made far more pertinent by virtue of its being lit. Mrs Ramsay's acknowledgement of the Lighthouse in its brightness is representative of her view of its importance as a destination. In the second paragraph the contrast between Mrs Ramsay and her husband is further emphasised, as the latter's inflexibility is implied as having a negative effect on James. The sense of progress Mrs Ramsay instils within her son is diminished, and James remembering it "all his life" implies his stagnation at this one point and his apparent inability to move forward.

Lee does, however, state that Mrs Ramsay is "the more pessimistic" (NVW 118) of the parents, and there are moments in the novel which prove this. An early description of how nobody ever "[looked] so sad" (26) is symptomatic of Woolf "capturing" her mother's "sadness" (Curtis 28), brought upon, as stated above, by the death of Herbert Duckworth. There is speculation over the possible occurrence of such a tragedy in Mrs Ramsay's past, which corresponds to this event:

What was there behind it—her beauty, her splendour? Had he blow his brains out, they asked, had he died the week before they were married—some other, earlier lover, of whom reached

one? Or was there nothing? nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind. (*TTL* 26-27)⁵

At one point, after contemplating how her children are “happier now than they [will] ever be again”, Mrs Ramsay asks her husband, “Why must they grow up and lose it all? Never will be they so happy.” (50) That her husband is “angry” at “such a gloomy view of life” (50) implies his preference for a more optimistic outlook, but his wife’s apparent pessimism could be ascribed to an outlook resulting from her sex and social position. The passage continues:

For it was odd; and she believed it to be true; that with all his gloom and desperation he was happier, more hopeful on the whole, than she was. Less exposed to human worries—perhaps that was it. He had always his work to fall back on. (50)

The last line hints at Mr Ramsay’s greater social comfort, given his status as a male intellectual in pre-World War I England. One must note, however, that this comfort is not something of which he is necessarily aware. The above passage is presented from his wife’s point of view and there is a moment in which he despairingly contemplates his failure at not having “done the thing he might have done” (39). Nevertheless, when viewed objectively, Mr Ramsay occupies spheres reserved mainly for men, namely the artistic, the literary and the intellectual. Woolf evinces a preoccupation with the lack of equality between men and women within these fields, as seen most clearly in *A Room of One’s Own*. In this essay Woolf discusses how “even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist” (71), before quoting the bibliographer Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges as saying “female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex” (98). By noting that “this sentence was written not in August 1828 but in August 1928” (98) Woolf indicates the protracted discrimination faced by women within artistic and literary fields. Woolf’s preoccupation with this discrimination surfaces in *To the Lighthouse*, the events of which are set during the 100-year period outlined in the quote above. Mrs Ramsay’s apparent exclusion from intellectual spheres is perhaps what catalyses her altruistic endeavours. While her husband has “his work to fall back on” (50), the wording here implying a sense of retreat, Mrs Ramsay advances into a social sphere which exposes her to

⁵ The “incomparable beauty” described herein is another autobiographical marker. Woolf mentions that Julia Stephen “was not only one of the most beautiful women, but also one of the most distinct” (“Reminiscences” 32). This specific excerpt recalls how Julia Stephen was *both* “very beautiful and very sad”, as well as how “these two qualities overloaded her image and tended to cancel out other features” (Lee, VW 81).

“eternal problems” such as “suffering; death; [and] the poor” and the fact that “there [is] always a woman dying of cancer” (51). Such a description recalls the following analysis of Julia Stephen by Woolf:

Her intellectual gifts had always been those that find their closest expression in action; she had great clearness of insight, sound judgement, humour, and a power of grasping the real nature of someone’s circumstances, and so arranging that the matter, whatever it was, fell into its true proportions at once. Sometimes with her natural impetuosity, she took it on herself to despatch difficulties with a high hand, like some commanding Empress. But most often I think her service, when it was not purely practical, lay in simply helping people by the light of her judgement and experience, to see what they really meant or felt. (“Reminiscences” 34-35)

If Mrs Ramsay is an avatar for Woolf’s mother, then her social “action” is pre-empted by “intellectual gifts” which contrast those exhibited by Mr Ramsay, given his tendency to retreat rather than act as Mrs Ramsay does. It is perhaps her first-hand experience of this suffering which precipitates Mrs Ramsay’s capacity to endure and her tendency to enforce notions of endurance, as exemplified by her insistence that her children “shall go through it”, the indefinite pronoun “it” referring to “life (51)” in this instance. Curtis notes that Julia Stephen’s devotion to “good causes” was a “self-imposed duty that she was to maintain for the rest of her life” and “formed some kind of effective barrier against the pain she suffered” (24). Mrs Ramsay recalls Julia Stephen in that she uses charity as a means to reflect and instil a sense of endurance in spite of hardship. It must be noted that charity is the main reason Mrs Ramsay wishes to make the journey to the Lighthouse:

‘But it may be fine—I expect it will be fine,’ said Mrs Ramsay, making some little twist of the reddish brown stocking she was knitting, impatiently. If she finished it tonight, if they did go to the Lighthouse after all, it was to be given to the Lighthouse keeper for his little boy, who was threatened with a tuberculous hip; together with a pile of old magazines, and some tobacco, indeed whatever she could find lying about, not really wanted, but only littering the room, to give those poor fellows who must be bored to death sitting all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp and trim the wick and rake about on their scrap of garden, something to amuse them. (*TTL* 8)

This moment proves the confluence of Mrs Ramsay's will to endure, the journey to the Lighthouse representing that will in the novel, and her commitment to her social role.

Newman asserts that "as the avid proponent of making and doing, marrying and begetting, Mrs Ramsay embraces the philosophy that validates the active and the procreative life" (89). Lee claims that Mrs Ramsay "attempts to build something that will endure, from social and domestic materials" (NVW 118), as proven not only by her charitable efforts (which exemplify her activities within the social sphere), but also by her being "driven on, too quickly she knew, almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry;⁶ people must have children" (TTL 51). This last assertion recalls Newman's mention of "the procreative life". While Friedman describes Mrs Ramsay as "annoyingly concerned with ordering the lives of others" (151), it seems that her overall response to hardship she perceives in the world is an attempt at perfecting domestic and social situations. A notable moment in the novel is the dinner party scene, during which Mrs Ramsay reflects on the following:

The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. She forbore to look at Mr Tansley. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her.
(69)

Mastering the creative role of hostess forms part of Mrs Ramsay's attempts at domestic accomplishment, and the passage above proves her wish to use the act of hostessing as a means of establishing connection between individuals. She actually recalls Woolf's characterisation of Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel in which, according to Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, "questions of nurturing, of preparing food, of hosting parties are central" (512). While discussing *Mrs Dalloway*, Jacob Littleton mentions "the social order of Britain in 1923", which "created standards that, far from allowing for free, individual expression, forced individuals into rigid roles with unfulfillable expectations" (48). Leavenworth notes that in *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa conforms to the "hostess-identity" (512), definitely one of the few deemed suitable for women during this time. *The Voyage Out* is recalled, since at the beginning of this novel Rachel Vinrace is said to appear "too still for a

⁶ Vanessa Curtis recalls how Julia Stephen often acted as a "matchmaker" (24), and Mrs Ramsay often reflects on the marital status of certain characters, specifically Lily Briscoe, who she at first says will "never marry" (TTL 17), but then insists "must marry" (59) William Banks; and Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, the prospective engaged couple who feature in "The Window".

hostess” (10).⁷ There is an obvious focus by Woolf, at least in some of her novels, on the conventional role of hostess in pre-World War II Britain. This focus clearly stems from Woolf’s wish to highlight the ubiquitous relegation of women into such stereotypical roles, though she clearly creates a discrepancy between her older and younger female characters in this regard. While Rachel and Lily Briscoe, as we shall see, wish to fashion identities outside of early-twentieth century convention, Mrs Ramsay and Clarissa take pride in their conventional domestic activities.⁸ That being said, Clarissa’s success in this regard forms the climax of her narrative, while for Mrs Ramsay it is only part of her domestic accomplishment within *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf does not describe her mother in such a specific domestic context as the dinner party scene, though Lee mentions “occasional dinner parties” (VW 94) at the Stephens’ residence. Woolf does, however, remember her mother as an artist-figure, describing her as “the creator of that crowded merry world with spun so gaily in the centre of [her] childhood” (SP 84). Littleton aligns “hostesses” and “artists”, describing how both “must create a world that draws in the reader or guest and takes her or him out of the logic of the mundane” (42). In applying this parallel to the case of Mrs Ramsay (as well as that of Clarissa Dalloway) one can say that in spite of the social restrictions placed upon women, as discussed above, they could still display a kind of artistry, though one still informed by their prescribed societal roles. Such an idea will prove particularly important when we consider Lily Briscoe’s occupation as a painter. There is also a moment in “A Sketch of the Past” where Woolf recalls some of the consequences of her mother’s death:

⁷ See p12.

⁸ Mrs Ramsay’s charitable inclinations actually recall Rachel Vinrace’s social awareness in *The Voyage Out*, as exemplified partly by her debate with Richard Dalloway (see p18). What is notable is that Mrs Ramsay is comfortable balancing the roles of wife and philanthropist, while Rachel unable to maintain this balance. Such a contrast, as well as those that exist between Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, suggest Woolf’s preoccupation with the differences between older and younger women in pre-World War II British society. That her younger characters are more rebellious implies a focus on new and less conventional opportunities for women in her era. That being said, the discrepancy Woolf creates being older and younger women is not necessarily for the purpose of impugning the conformity of the former, as Lee suggests:

Virginia Woolf spent much of her writing life exposing and analysing those roles, but also in looking longingly back to the world which engendered them. There is an extraordinary gap between her satirical repudiation of acceptable behaviour for women in *Three Guineas* or *The Years*, and the affectionate yearning with which she recalls the culture of her mother’s generation. (VW 85)

One can infer, therefore, that Woolf’s depiction of Mrs Ramsay is symptomatic of this “yearning” and of her wish to honour and remember her mother.

There were no more parties; no more young men and women laughing. No more flashing visions of white summer dresses and hansom dashing off to private views and dinner parties, none of that natural life and gaiety which my mother had created. (94)

Julia Stephen is once again aligned with “dinner parties”, and what I think Woolf does within the dinner-party scene is go beyond recalling her mother’s charitable endeavours and penchant for matchmaking, and increase the sense of her domestic endeavours as well, in order to highlight her overwhelming prowess within a familial, domestic, and social context.

While Mrs Ramsay is representative of success within the domestic sphere, Mr Ramsay, as noted above, is representative of success within the intellectual sphere. Newman notes that “like Leslie Stephen, Mr. Ramsay leads a life of arduous intellectual endeavour” (84). Lee states, however, that Mr Ramsay “is very largely a comic character” (119) and that Woolf meant for him “to be ludicrous” (120). His constant introspection could be read as ridiculous, particularly in a scene where he very self-consciously assesses the extent of his intellectual prowess:

It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. (30)

The repetition at the end of this excerpt reads humorously due to the excessive self-consciousness it evokes. Newman mentions how the “paternal portrait” presented by Woolf was considered so “irreverent” that “she was widely criticized for her [apparent] disloyalty” (84). She goes on to say, however, that “in the deepest reading of the novel” Mr Ramsay “is a far more sympathetic than is generally allowed” (84). An example of this rests between the excerpt above and Mr Ramsay’s later consideration of the “number of letters” after Q, “the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes” (30). Standing out in this passage is his earlier mentioned recognition of the “wife and son” who need “his protection” (30). There is a later moment in which his longing for a life of solitude and despairing introspection is interrupted by the acknowledgement of his children:

That was the country he liked best, over there; those sand-hills dwindling away into darkness. One could walk all day without meeting a soul. There was not a house scarcely, not a single village for miles on end. One could worry things out alone. There were little sandy beaches where no one had been since the beginning of time. The seals sat up and looked at you. It sometimes seemed to him that in a little house out there, alone—he broke off sighing. He had no right. The father of eight children—he reminded himself. And he would have been a beast and a cur to wish a single thing altered. Andrew would be a better man than he had been. Prue would be a beauty, her mother said. They would stem the flood a bit. That was a good bit of work on the whole—his eight children. They showed he did not damn the poor little universe entirely, for on an evening like this, he thought, looking at the land dwindling away, the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea. (58)

Mr Ramsay recognises his role as father, and it incurs a sense of pride and care. The emotional gravity of moments such as this undercuts Mr Ramsay's gloom and (apparent) ridiculousness. His entire train of thought, particularly in the earlier episode, attests more to the rigidity of his character than any marker of intellectual pompousness. His overwhelming tendency towards introspection is illustrated, but more as a means for Woolf to present a contrast between this tendency and Mrs Ramsay's less inhibited nature. In fact, while Mr Ramsay marks the autobiographical nature of *To the Lighthouse* by recalling Leslie Stephen, he is also a character against whom Woolf can effectively contrast others in order to expound on numerous concerns prevalent within the novel, and consequently in her entire *oeuvre*. Newman states that "in dealing with Mr Ramsay Woolf does not hesitate to impugn a masculine ethos she found oppressive", and that "her quarrel is finally not with the man himself, but with the system in which he is diminished and disfigured, but retaining still the vestiges of a better self" (85). Indeed, it is more the effect of this "ethos" on Mr Ramsay that is highlighted within *To the Lighthouse*. Newman elaborates:

The contention is not at all with the intellectual life preempted by men, but with the damaging consequences of the preemption. It is Mr. Ramsay's colossal self-absorption, his impatience with the needs of others, his patriarchal tyranny, the familiar behavior that was deeply resented in life, that she does not hesitate to castigate in fiction. Inevitably, her indictment moves beyond familial concerns. The privileged status of the father affects directly the caliber of his mind, the quality of his work. It

is not surprising, finally, that for all his earnest endeavor Mr. Ramsay should fail to achieve the excellence to which he aspires. More than the domestic burdens of which he continually complains, it is the painful awareness of limitation, the tantalizing presence of the unachievable goal that rob him of contentment in his work. (85)

Mr Ramsay's feelings of failure and "limitation" within his intellectual sphere are evinced after his despairing estimation that he will "never" go beyond what is already capable of, symbolised by the letter Q, and "reach R" (*TTL* 31). The reflection continues thus:

How many men in a thousand million, he asked himself, reach Z after all? Surely the leader of a forlorn hope may ask himself that, and answer, without treachery to the expedition behind him, 'One perhaps'. One in a generation. Is he to be blamed then if he is not that one? provided he has toiled honestly, given to the best of his power, till he has no more left to give? And his fame lasts how long? It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter. His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years? (asked Mr Ramsay ironically, staring at the hedge). What, indeed, if you look from a mountain-top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare. His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still. (32)

Such thoughts remind the reader of the rigidity and retreat exhibited by Mr Ramsay. It seems he cannot move forward due to his particular brand of stoicism as well as his (self-perceived) failure to meet expectations within his particular field.

Mr Ramsay does not seem, as Lee suggests, an object of ridicule or disparagement, and there is evidence that Woolf has characterised her father as an ambivalent figure. In one moment Mr Ramsay is said to inspire "in William Bankes (intermittently) and in Charles Tansley (obsequiously) and in his wife now, when she looked up and saw him standing at the edge of the lawn, profound reverence, and pity, and gratitude" (38). The "reverence" and "gratitude" are balanced by the "pity", as well as Bankes's "[intermittent]" positive regard and Tansley's obsequiousness. More importantly, descriptions of Mr Ramsay from the point of view of Woolf's avatar, Lily Briscoe, point to Woolf's multifaceted depiction of Leslie Stephen. In response to her possible suitor, William Bankes, describing Mr Ramsay as "a bit of a hypocrite", Lily's thoughts read thus:

A bit of a hypocrite? she repeated. Oh no—the most sincere of men, the truest (here he was), the best; but, looking down, she thought, he is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust (40)

This recalls Lily's earlier comparison of William to Mr Ramsay:

You have greatness, she continued, but Mr Ramsay has none of it. He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant; he wears Mrs Ramsay to death; but he has what you (she addressed Mr Bankes) have not; a fiery unworldliness; he knows nothing about trifles; he loves dogs and his children. (23)

The critical descriptions of Mr Ramsay in these excerpts recall Woolf's reference to her father as "spartan, ascetic, [and] puritanical" (SP 68), but Lily's exclamation that one should "think of his work!" (22) does suggest Woolf's appreciation for her father's intellectual efforts. Thomas S.W. Lewis states that in her autobiographical works "she is careful to distinguish between Stephen's failures as a father and his importance as a thinker" (191). Lee discusses, in more depth, Woolf's ambivalent preoccupation with her father throughout her life, mentioning how "in the 1930s, she wrote an affectionate centenary tribute to him, but [...] also used him for her politicised arguments against patriarchy in *The Years* and *Three Guineas*" (VW 68). She also mentions how Woolf "almost always wrote about him as an old man", but how, "at the end of her life, she tried to reimagine him as young" (VW 68). She discusses Woolf's depiction of him in "A Sketch of the Past":

In her last memoir, she moves about with wonderful imaginative fluency between his different ages, and merges the Victorian boy, the Cambridge intellectual, the tyrannical Old Man whose gloom and rages and deafness overshadowed her life between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two, and the influential man of letters in his later years. (69)

Such an assortment of identities recalls the numerous "selves of which we are built up" mentioned in *Orlando* (212-213).⁹ That Woolf presents an ambivalent portrait of her father in *To the Lighthouse* not only evinces a preoccupation with the difficulty in capturing the essence of character, but also suggests Woolf's departure from presenting her father as a mere caricature. If there is any particular rebelliousness displayed by Woolf against her father

⁹ See p97.

within *To the Lighthouse* it is the characterisation of herself as a young woman who breaks social convention by being an artist. Peach mentions a “conflict” in *To the Lighthouse* between “the emergence of new desires and fantasies”, such as Lily’s artistic aspirations, and “the limitations of male dominated social institutions” (121), such as those represented by Mr Ramsay. Lily introspectively attempts to compensate for being “an unmarried woman” by recalling such priorities as “her father; her home; even, had she dared to say it, her painting” (TTL 43). Her artistic occupation is implied to be somewhat audacious, particularly in a time when women were supposed to fulfil conventional societal roles and only men, such as Mr Ramsay, were allowed to be the occupants of the artistic sphere. This recalls how, as this thesis demonstrates, Woolf broke the conventions of biography, the patriarchal literary genre of which her father was a noted and traditionally inclined proponent. At one point, Woolf was expected to fulfil “the role for the family’s woman historian” by offering an “unsigned contribution” (Lee, VW 57) to the historian Frederic Maitland’s biography of her father. What Woolf did was “[sabotage] that subservient role and rewrote her family history in her own terms” by making “her female inheritance count for just as much as father’s influence” (57), another example of her emphasis on female subjects and voices within biography, and a reminder of the pertinence of Orlando’s male *and* female ancestry in forming his/her character. Within the context of artistry, Woolf transposes the dynamic between her and Leslie Stephen to *To the Lighthouse* by including Lily Briscoe, a young female artist-figure like herself who subtly rebels against the extremely patriarchal fields of art and intellect, represented by Mr Ramsay, the father-figure. Lily’s various criticisms of Mr Ramsay, her strong artistic inclinations, and her rebellion against societal norms recall the musically inclined¹⁰ and somewhat audacious Rachel Vinrace refusing to “praise” her father in *The Voyage Out* (15).¹¹

“Sexual antitheses” and the “looking glass”: echoes of *A Room of One’s Own* in *To the Lighthouse*

Woolf’s addition of Charles Tansley to *To the Lighthouse* seems a more explicit and unswerving means to critique the patriarchal assumption of intellectual and artistic spheres in her era. Tansley shares Mr Ramsay’s opinion that there is “no going to the Lighthouse” (16), proof of his earlier mentioned obsequiousness and source of irritation for Mrs Ramsay, and is

¹⁰ See p38.

¹¹ See p12.

an object of ridicule for most of the Ramsay family. Mrs Ramsay finds him “odious” (16), and inwardly critiques his intellectual pretensions:

He worked hard—seven hours a day; his subject was now the influence of something upon somebody—they were walking on and Mrs Ramsay did not quite catch the meaning, only the words, here and there...dissertation...fellowship...lectureship. She could not follow the ugly academic jargon, that rattled itself off so glibly (14)

Such criticisms are ironic considering Tansley’s realisation that Mrs Ramsay is “the most beautiful person he [has] ever seen” (15), proof of the positive impact Mrs Ramsay has on other characters. Another pertinent moment occurs when Lily recalls Tansley “whispering in her ear, ‘Women can’t paint, women can’t write...’” (42). This utterance recalls Sir Egerton Brydges’ assertion that “female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex” (qtd. in Woolf, *AROO* 98), as well as “Mr S.W.” intruding upon Orlando and her fellow female biographers, impugning their attempts at relaying their own life-stories to each other (*O* 152).¹² In *To the Lighthouse*, Charles Tansley is the figure aligned with these intrusive and oppressive male voices, and his misogyny is demonstrated during the dinner party:

He was not going to be condescended to by these silly women. He had been reading in his room, and now he came down and it all seemed to him silly, superficial, flimsy. Why did they dress? He had come down in ordinary clothes. He had not got any dress clothes. ‘One never gets anything worth having by post’—that was the sort of thing they were always saying. They made men say that sort of thing. Yes, it was pretty well true, he thought. They never got anything worth having from one year’s end to another. They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women’s fault. Women made civilization impossible with all their ‘charm’, all their silliness. (70)

Tansley’s movement from “reading” to the dinner party symbolises a movement from the field of male-dominated intellectualism to that of female-dominated domesticity, and such a moment recalls *The Voyage Out*, in which male and female patterns of thinking are pitted against each other. Mr Ramsay and Charles Tansley are reminiscent of St John Hirst and Richard Dalloway, in that they are also men “who [stand] solidly for fact” (Kelley 14).

¹² See p77.

Richard's opinions on the set functions of human beings in society, elucidated during his debate with Rachel, are mirrored by the reflection of Mr Ramsay

that men should labour and sweat on the windy beach at night, pitting muscle and brain against the waves and the wind; he liked men to work like that, and women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors, while men were drowned, out there in a storm. (*TTL* 135-136)

The social duties he imagines herein are far more specific than those envisioned by Richard, but they are patriarchally informed and do not go anywhere beyond being stereotypes. However, the “action” (14) Kelley aligns with Richard Dalloway is lacking in the case of Tansley and Mr Ramsay, both tending instead towards introspection and retreat.

Where Mr Ramsay notably differs from Charles Tansley, however, is that despite casting aspersions over certain aspects of female behaviour, he still exhibits a degree of positive regard for women:

He thought, women are always like that; the vagueness of their minds is hopeless; it was a thing he had never been able to understand; but so it was. It had been so with her—his wife. They could not keep anything clearly fixed in their minds. But he had been wrong to be angry with her; moreover, did he not rather like this vagueness in women? It was part of their extraordinary charm. (*TTL* 138)

What is interesting in *To the Lighthouse* is the difference between female responses to the fact-oriented voice that is represented by these two men, specifically those offered by Lily and Mrs Ramsay. An episode involving Tansley and Lily during the dinner party displays the pair's neat contrast against Mr and Mrs Ramsay:

He [Tansley] felt extremely, even physically, uncomfortable. He wanted somebody to give him a chance of asserting himself. He wanted it so urgently that he fidgeted in his chair, looked at this person, then at that person, tried to break into their talk, opened his mouth and shut it again. They were talking about the fishing industry. Why did no one ask him his opinion? What did they know about the fishing industry?

Lily Briscoe knew all that. Sitting opposite him could she not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself lying dark in the mist of his flesh—that thin mist which convention had laid over

his burning desire to break into the conversation? But, she thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how he sneered at women, 'can't paint, can't write', why should I help him to relieve himself?

There is a code of behaviour she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed as it is their duty, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames. Then, she thought, I should certainly expect Mr Tansley to get me out. But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things? So she sat there smiling. (74-75)

The "code of behaviour" mentioned herein, and humorously assigned some official status by it constituting a series of articles, recalls Woolf's meditation in *A Room of One's Own* on the function of women to serve "as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (45). This idea reflects the human tendency to think that "other people are inferior to oneself" and feel that "one has some innate superiority" (45) in order to generate "self-confidence" (44).

The notion of the "looking-glass" appears in two scenes within *To the Lighthouse*, though each is markedly different. The first occurs after Mrs Ramsay precipitates her husband's excursion out of the house and there reads the description of "the pulse" which "[throbs] through her", and which is said to "enclose her and her husband, and to give to each that solace which two different notes, one high, one low, struck together, seem to give each other as they combine" (34). It is "as this resonance [dies]", however, that "some faintly disagreeable sensation" (34) comes over her, stemming from that fact that she does not like, "even for a second, to feel finer than her husband" (35). Such displeasure might arise from her acknowledgement that it is her duty, as a woman, to be the "looking-glass" into which he gazes in order to feel superior, even though she is often presented as the superior figure. She is favoured by James and beloved by Lily and Charles Tansley; she is representative of a more active inclination, unlike her husband who is aligned with retreat and rigidity; and there is a moment when her particular field of expertise, i.e. "domesticity", is said to "[triumph]" (28). This last moment is echoed right at the end of "The Window", when Mrs Ramsay does seem to acknowledge her superiority:

And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)—

‘Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow.’
She had not said it but he knew it. And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. (100)

The following passage, just earlier in the novel, is linked to this:

And what then? For she felt that he was still looking at her, but that his look had changed. He wanted something—wanted the thing she always found it so difficult to give him; wanted her to tell him that she loved him. (99-100)

The impact of Mrs Ramsay on Mr Ramsay is so palpable that it need not be spoken, and this is the source of Mrs Ramsay’s “[triumph]”. There is a contest between the two, and for Mrs Ramsay to have to explicate her love would be giving in to him. That Mr Ramsay “[knows] it”, but does not say as much, signifies his avoidance of accepting defeat. Mrs Ramsay’s qualms about feeling “finer than her husband” (35) are the reason she openly accepts his claim that it will “be wet” the next day. This is, after all, the argument that begins the novel, and though Mrs Ramsay’s previous contradictions have won her more affection from James, her agreement with Mr Ramsay is a means to make him feel triumphant and superior. Woolf does say in *A Room of One’s Own* that if a woman “begins to tell the truth”, then the “fitness” of the aggrandised man’s “life” will be “diminished” (46). Mrs Ramsay acknowledges this and performs her duty as the kind of woman Woolf describes in this part of her essay. This sense of duty towards her husband, along with her charity and domestic accomplishments, recalls Julia Stephen, who “was opposed to female suffrage and thought women should only be educated for domestic careers”, and whose “image”, partly constituting “young mother with child”, is “a political image, embodying the acceptable roles for a beautiful middle-class woman in the nineteenth century” (Lee, VW 85). Countering the moment at the end of “The Window” is the dinner party scene, during which Lily, a member of the sex Tansley deems inferior, reflects upon her socially prescribed duty to increase his confidence. She eventually performs the task, but for different reasons to those expected of her:

“Will you take me [to the Lighthouse], Mr Tansley?” said Lily, quickly, kindly, for, of course, if Mrs Ramsay said to her, as in

effect she did, “I am drowning, my dear, in seas of fire. Unless you apply some balm to the anguish of this hour and say something nice to that young man there, life will run upon the rocks—indeed I hear the grating and the growling at this minute. My nerves are taut as fiddle strings. Another touch and they will snap’—when Mrs Ramsay said all this, as the glance in her eyes, said it, of course for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment—what happens if one is no nice to that young man there—and be nice. (*TTL* 75)

It is Mrs Ramsay who impacts Lily’s decision to forego her “experiment” in breaking away from convention, thereby diminishing her annoyance at the patronising voice of a male intellectual. This definitely points to the overwhelming effect Mrs Ramsay has on Lily, but also suggests the difference between the two women with regard to social convention. While the older character sticks by her apparent duty in making a man feel superior, the younger considers transgressing, and this seems another example of Woolf attempting to write a female character out of social convention. If Lily is Woolf’s avatar, then such temerity might parallel Woolf’s own annoyance with the assumed authority men enjoyed over women in various spheres. Indeed, the scene at the dinner party somewhat reflects Newman’s idea of “enriching mutuality” (83) in that it presents a confluence of Woolf’s feminist agenda and a fictionalised expression of the overwhelming and impactful presence of the mother-figure.

“Uniquely, a painter”: Woolf’s depiction of Lily Briscoe

Newman states that “in contrast to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, whose biographical sources are clearly recognizable, Lily’s etiology remains uncertain” and that “she does not greatly resemble Woolf physically or temperamentally” (87). While this might be true, there is evidence to support the idea that Lily definitely is an avatar for Woolf. The main difference between Woolf and Lily is the fact that Lily is “not a writer like [Woolf] herself, like most of the artists who appear in her fiction, but, uniquely, a painter” (87). That being said, Lily’s occupation is a creative one, and she also evinces, more importantly, a great attachment to Mrs Ramsay, the significant mother-figure of the novel. There are aspects of the dynamic between Lily and Mrs Ramsay which veer towards the fictional. While Lily’s presence is crucial to the autobiographical and therapeutic aspects of the novel, there are justifications for the factors that distance Woolf from her. Newman asserts that Lily’s occupation as “a painter rather than a novelist provides Woolf with the rare opportunity to objectify the process of

creation” (87). Lee expounds on the possible reasons which catalysed Woolf’s decision to make Lily a painter:

Her [Woolf’s] thoughts on biography are comparable to the work being done by the painters she knew, particularly the portraits by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Carrington: domestic, impressionistic, irreverent, informal portraits which sought the essence of character through colour and form. (VW 12)

Newman echoes part of this excerpt by claiming that Lily’s “brooding preoccupation with Mrs Ramsay represents in the most revealing terms that Woolf has yet provided, the artist’s struggle to capture the essence of character” (87). Woolf, therefore, is not only using the dynamic between Lily and Mrs Ramsay as a means of catharsis, but also demonstrates, from a distance, and in a way that is more practical and obvious, the difficulty of encapsulating character through artistic means. When Lily is introduced to the reader she exhibits a moment of hesitation in the creation of a painting:

It was in that moment’s flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: ‘But this is what I see’, and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. (TTL 19)

The “vision” mentioned here is the same one that Lily is finally able to realise at the end of *To the Lighthouse*. Her hesitation is significant in this moment for two particular reasons. The first relates to the Woolf’s major preoccupation with getting at “the essence of personality (Lee, VW 8), particularly exemplified by *Orlando*, in which Woolf depicts her subject in such a multifaceted manner in order to explicate the difficulty in capturing Vita Sackville-West’s essential self. There is also the moment where Orlando looks at “the thing itself” in order to effectively describe “nature”, but notes how “nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy” (O 13).¹³ It seems, for Woolf, both literature *and* art present their proponents with obstacles when it comes to depicting “the thing itself”, and she clearly recognised new means by which these art forms could succeed in this regard. Peach notes that “the ruminations on

¹³ See p71.

[Lily] Briscoe's art" are "undoubtedly Woolf's own self-conscious reflections on the experience of writing fiction" (116). Lee also conflates Woolf's medium with Lily's when she notes how "Woolf's biography" reacts "against tradition [just] as the artists were reacting against old Academy styles" (12). In a sense, Lily is Mrs Ramsay's biographer and her difficulty is depicting her subject's personality which, as in the case of all subjects, is of "rainbow-like intangibility" (NB 186).¹⁴

The "wedge-shaped core of darkness": the elusiveness of Mrs Ramsay's essence

The following excerpt from *To the Lighthouse*, focalised from Lily's point of view, reveals her difficulty in capturing Mrs Ramsay:

How did she [Mrs Ramsay] differ? What was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from its twisted finger, hers indisputably. (42)

The image of the glove is echoed later:

Then, she remembered, she had laid her head on Mrs Ramsay's lap and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand. There she sat, simple, serious. She had recovered her sense of her now—this was the glove's twisted finger. (43)

It seems that memory has catalysed Lily's ability to get a better "sense" of Mrs Ramsay.

What is notable about this particular memory of Lily's is that it relates to a pertinent memory of Woolf's:

Certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first. My first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to me as I pressed my cheek against it. (SP 81)

Woolf seems to have transposed an early moment of physical intimacy with her mother to the dynamic between Lily and Mrs Ramsay, and thus the autobiographical aspect of their relationship is emphasised. Julia Stephen and Mrs Ramsay are also given almost religious

¹⁴ See p3.

status. If “childhood” is a “Cathedral” then Woolf could be assigning to her mother some high religious role, and the image of Mrs Ramsay “presiding with immutable calm over destinies” makes her seem omnipotent and omniscient. A whole cascade of memories regarding Julia Stephen’s physicality follow the above description, and later in the memoir Woolf states the following:

But if I turn to my mother, how difficult it is to single her out as she really was; to imagine what she was thinking, to put a single sentence in her mouth! I dream; I make up pictures of a summer’s afternoon. (87)

In trying “to single” Julia out “as what she really was”, Woolf parallels Lily’s attempt at capturing “the essential thing” (*TTL* 42) in her artwork. Woolf notes that while there is “the memory of her that remains”, there is “nothing to check that memory by; nothing to bring it to ground with” (SP 85). Memory is described rather cynically in *Orlando* as a “seamstress, and a capricious one at that” (55), but also as a means to piece together “fragments” in order “to make up a picture” of the “subject’s life and character” (89). In *To the Lighthouse* and “A Sketch of the Past” memory is also rendered ambivalent. It appears to be a possible means by which Woolf, the daughter, and Lily, the daughter-figure, can advance towards an effective delineation of their subjects. Memories can help form an image and that image can be put on paper as a result. It is, however, problematized as well, since each memory of a subject can correspond to different facets of his or her character but not necessarily to the essence of that person’s character. One must recall the “great variety of selves” Orlando has “to call upon”, and the fact that “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (213). This corresponds to Lily later “thinking how many shapes one person might wear” (*TTL* 159). In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf posits that these numerous “selves” or “shapes” obscure the essence of character, particularly in this reflection of Mrs Ramsay’s:

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit; and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its

attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everyone there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. (52-53)

The “self” constantly mentioned herein refers to the essence of character, which has been stripped of its “attachments”. The description of it as a “core” emphasises its comparison to something central around which these “apparitions” revolve. That it is a core “of darkness” points to how obscure, unreachable and incomprehensible it is. This excerpt immediately succeeds Mrs Ramsay’s reflection that “children never forget”, which she posits as a reason for the importance of “what one said” and “what one did” (52). This suggests that what Mrs Ramsay exposes to others is not her essence, and instead signifies a role she plays. An example of this would be her outward kindness to Charles Tansley which counters her inward reflection that he is “an odious little man” (16). This is not to say, however, that she is deliberately duplicitous, and I think that Woolf’s presentation of the mother-figure in this manner parallels her own inability at perceiving her own mother’s true self. She states the following in “A Sketch of the Past”:

What a jumble of things I can remember, if I let my mind run, about my mother; but they are all of her in company; of her surrounded; of her generalised; dispersed, omnipresent, of her as the creator of that crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood. (84)

Such a description presents Julia Stephen as constantly playing a role, and being split up into a variety of selves that attended to the various expectations of that role. Woolf does mention just later that her mother was “the centre” of this “world”, and that “it was herself” (84), but this could merely be a recollection of what she thought as a young girl, and I think *this* is a pertinent factor in Woolf’s depiction of Mrs Ramsay. Lee asserts that it is “obviously” difficult for Woolf to capture her mother “because she died when Virginia was thirteen”,¹⁵

¹⁵ An interesting moment in *To the Lighthouse* is when Prue Ramsay observes her mother at the dinner and describes her as “the thing itself [...] as if there were only one person like that in the world” (94), a possible indication that she is more capable of capturing the essence of her mother’s character. She thinks “what a chance” it is for “Lily to see her” and feels what “an extraordinary stroke of fortune” it is “for her [Prue] to have her” (94). Such a discrepancy between Prue and Lily in being able to capture Mrs Ramsay might parallel Stella

though she also notes that Julia Stephen “seems to have been reticent and aloof, and her past was kept mysterious” (VW 81). This is perhaps why the reason for Mrs Ramsay’s perpetual sadness is a matter of speculation and not certainty; though one must still wonder how certain Woolf would have been about her mother’s past and identity given how young she was at the time of Julia Stephen’s death. It seems that, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf is able to conjure memories of the “attachments” her mother put on display and which formed a substantial part of her role as mother, but cannot find the “core” around which they revolved. Thus her depiction of Mrs Ramsay is deliberately obscure and Lily’s first attempt at capturing Mrs Ramsay is unsuccessful. We will see, however, that memory, and dipping “into the past” (TTL 141), is a sufficient means for Lily to overcome her feelings for Mrs Ramsay. The parallel between Woolf and Lily points to the metafictional aspect of *To the Lighthouse*. Hafley notes that “the novel itself is comparable to Lily’s painting, for its purpose too is to capture and render stable and permanent the essence of Mrs Ramsay” (144), though Woolf is really attempting to capture the figure of her mother in the guise of Mrs Ramsay. In addition, the attempt taken by Woolf is a marker of the novel’s autobiographical nature, while Lily’s fictional artistic endeavour proves Newman’s assertion that Woolf is trying “to objectify the process of creation” (87). Autobiography and fiction come into confluence as a result.

There is another pertinent moment in which Lily’s painting is scrutinised by William Bankes:

Taking out a penknife, Mr Bankes tapped the canvas with the bone handle. What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, ‘just there?’ he asked.

It was Mrs Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection—that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed?—except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was, Mr Bankes was interested. Mother and child then—objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty—might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence. (TTL 45)

That Lily has not used “a human shape” to indicate Mrs Ramsay and James is perhaps suggestive of her attempts to depict qualities that go beyond her subjects’ physicality.

Duckworth (for whom Prue is an avatar) having a better chance than Woolf in getting to know Julia Stephen. After all, Stella was twice Woolf’s age when Julia died.

Newman asserts that “the stark abstraction of her painting seeks to render indirectly, but, she implies, more profoundly than graphic reproduction the hidden essence of her subject” (88).¹⁶ In the same way that Vita Sackville-West is portrayed as sexually fluid and longevous, Mrs Ramsay is depicted as an abstract visual feature. The “triangular purple shape” does not seem to have a specific symbolic purpose, and seems rather an explicit visual means for Woolf to indicate the difficulty in capturing, as Newman says, “the essence of character” (87). It recalls Mrs Ramsay’s “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (*TTL* 52), as noted by Henry R. Harrington, who states that when “stripped of all relations with the world around her, Mrs. Ramsay sees herself as the invisible shape Lily portrays visibly” (366-367). This connection emphasises the parallel between Woolf’s characterisation of her mother and Lily’s depiction of Mrs Ramsay. The inscrutable natures of both mothers, and the self-reflexive nature of *To the Lighthouse*, are further emphasised in Lily’s response to Bankes:

But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses, too, in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form, if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. (*TTL* 45)

The “senses” in which a person might “reverence” the subjects of Lily’s painting correspond to the various selves by which a subject might be identified. The inscrutable abstract image holds within it a variety of interpretations, each one not entirely indicative of the subject’s essential character. This recalls Mrs Ramsay’s (and Julia Stephen’s) numerous “attachments” which obscure her defining “core” (52). In addition, the painting being interpreted as a “tribute” to Mrs Ramsay reflects Woolf’s “tribute to Julia in the character of Mrs Ramsay” (Curtis 28) in the novel itself. Mr Bankes’s interpretation of the “triangular purple shape” as symbolising the union of “mother and child” is confined by convention and informed by the role of mother Mrs Ramsay plays out. Then again, Mrs Ramsay’s role as mother forms part of her notable accomplishment in the domestic sphere, so Lily could very well be depicting this almost defining aspect of Mrs Ramsay’s character. Indeed, if social and domestic success forms a crucial part of her life, then it would be easy to define her by this success, and the

¹⁶ The use of a painting to highlight the issue of capturing “the essence of character” recalls the moments in *The Voyage Out*, *The Years* and *Orlando* where portraiture or reflection is rendered problematic in presenting an accurate image of a certain subject. Indeed, these moments involve the “graphic reproduction” of characters’ actual figures in either forced or fleeting attitudes, which consequently does not depict their personalities in as veracious a manner as an abstract piece might (see pp13-15 and pp84-85).

same logic could be applied to the case of Julia Stephen. As mentioned above, the role of “young mother with child” formed part of the “political image” Stephen was trying to cultivate (Lee, VW 85). The recognition of Mrs Ramsay’s social and domestic endeavours form part of Lily’s insecurity. The latter’s aforementioned hesitation is also significant because it extends to her apparent feelings of failure when comparing her life to Mrs Ramsay’s:

And it was then too, in that chill and windy way, as she began to paint, that there forced themselves upon her other things, her own inadequacy, her insignificance, keeping house for her father off the Brompton Road, and had much ado to control her impulse to fling herself (thank Heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs Ramsay’s knee and say to her—but what could one say to her? ‘I’m in love with you’? No, that was not true. ‘I’m in love with this all’, waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? (*TTL* 19)

There is a parallelism in this excerpt, signified by the lines “I’m in love with you” and “I’m in love with this all”. The pronoun “you” obviously refers to Mrs Ramsay, and its parallel with “this all” suggests that Mrs Ramsay represents the amalgamation of “all” that surrounds her at this point, i.e. the domestic utopia for which she is responsible. This recalls Woolf defining her mother’s self in terms of the “crowded merry world” she created (SP 84). Lily’s later attempt “to start the tune of Mrs Ramsay in her head” (*TTL* 42) is perhaps evident of a wish to assimilate the character and behaviour of Mrs Ramsay, and her reflection that “an unmarried woman”, unlike herself, “has missed the best of life” (43) might point to feelings of failure within the spheres of marriage and domesticity. Even her “keeping house for her father off the Brompton Road” (19), both a domestic and charitable effort, seems rather feeble in comparison to Mrs Ramsay’s efforts. Sharon Kaehele and Howard German suggest, however, that Lily “enjoys being unmarried and has found a satisfactory purpose in art”, and therefore “has no feelings about the mutual social needs of the sexes” (203). They extend the range of Lily’s apparent indifference to include “the dinner”, at which, as we have seen, she “feels no sympathy for the suffering ego of Tansley but speculates sceptically about the social interdependence of the sexes” (203). Indeed, Lily’s thought-process at the dinner-party scene and her commitment to her art are connected, since both signify her movement away from prescribed social duties, such as helping Charles Tansley assert himself. Regarding her painting, we must remember the description of it being something Lily “[dares]” (*TTL* 43) to

mention, as well the image of her having to “maintain her courage” while trying to capture her “vision” (19). Both moments signify her art as being an audacious and bold endeavour. Going back to the dinner party scene, however, we must note Lily’s reflection therein on how Mrs Ramsay “always” gets “her own way in the end” (82), as well as the fact that her decision to be kind to Tansley is precipitated by a consideration of Mrs Ramsay’s feelings. It seems that Lily struggles to maintain some kind of identity amidst an atmosphere presided over by Mrs Ramsay, and this difficulty points to both Woolf’s fictional and autobiographical agendas within the novel. As in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf is attempting to write a rebellious and artistically inclined female character away from conventions that are perfected by a mother-figure in *To the Lighthouse*. This seems to parallel Woolf, herself an outspoken artist, who is trying to write herself away from the overwhelming figure of her mother. The dynamic between Lily and Mrs Ramsay presents an easy means for Woolf to oscillate between a fiction imbued with social commentary that is familiar to her (and her readers) and a cathartic autobiography

“Many things had changed since then”: fictionalised and generalised experience in “Time Passes”

The most pertinent section of the novel in terms of its relation to Woolf’s life is “Time Passes”, which separates “The Window” and “The Lighthouse”. It is the events which occur in this middle section that catalyse the actions of various characters, their passage from the window and towards the lighthouse symbolising their own means of achieving catharsis. The conversation in Chapter One of this section seems to foreshadow its content:

‘Well, we must wait for the future to show,’ said Mr Banks, coming in from the terrace.
 ‘It’s almost too dark to see,’ said Andrew, coming up from the beach.
 ‘One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land,’ said Prue.
 ‘Do we leave that light burning?’ said Lily as they took their coats off indoors.
 ‘No,’ said Prue, ‘not if everyone’s in.’
 ‘Andrew,’ she called back, ‘just put out the light in the hall.’ (103)

The sudden movement from Mr Banks’s mention of “the future” to Andrew’s mention of darkness signals the uncertainty of these characters’ destinies, and Prue’s image of the

indistinguishable “land” and “sea” prefigures the eventual impingement of devastation, represented by water, upon the lives of these characters. Both Andrew and Prue’s statements are echoed in the beginning of Part Two:

So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. (103)

As noted earlier, water is aligned with suffering and destruction, while images of light are aligned with endurance, as exemplified by the uninhibited Mrs Ramsay’s connection to the Lighthouse. Indeed, the image of the Lighthouse is the most enduring throughout the novel, and reaching it marks the endurance of certain characters. In “Time Passes” the images of the beach house which is “gone to rack and ruin” (113) are countered by its longevity and almost animated and soothing presence:

When darkness fell, the stroke of the Lighthouse, which had laid itself with such authority upon the carpet in the darkness, tracing its pattern came now in the softer light of spring mixed with moonlight gliding gently as if it laid its caress and lingered stealthily and looked and came lovingly again. (108-109)

The calming imagery in this passage almost makes the Lighthouse seem like a maternal presence, thus extending its alignment with Mrs Ramsay. There is a later description which further emphasises its longevity:

Only the Lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a moment, sent its sudden stare over bed and wall in the darkness of winter, looked with equanimity at the thistle and the swallow, the rat and the straw. (113)

It is interesting that in Part One, Lily is the character who considers leaving a “light burning” (103), while Prue and Andrew are the ones who suggest the putting out of lights. Lily, after all, is one of the novel’s enduring figures, while Prue and Andrew are implicated in the more devastating moments of “Time Passes”. The section’s first part actually recalls Mr Ramsay’s

consideration of Andrew and Prue's futures immediately preceding his vision of "the little island" as "pathetically small" and "half swallowed up in the sea" (58). Woolf seems to increase expectations for these characters' futures, which makes their eventual deaths all the more shocking.

The events recounted in "Time Passes" include the deaths of Mrs Ramsay, Prue, from "some illness connected with childbirth" (108), and Andrew Ramsay during the First World War. Each of these deaths is mentioned "in a baldly bracketed, flat statement inserted into the flowing prose of ongoing life" (Fleishman 610), its abruptness weighing down that prose as a means to reflect its gravity. That being said, the "flowing" nature of this prose reflects the continuation of life in spite of death, a contrast highlighted in many of Woolf's novels. Fleishman notes that "of greater significance than the shifting of place is the alteration of the historical time of the novel from the pre-World War I era to a decade which encompasses the war" (609). He further illuminates the basis for these events:

Besides the mothers [Julia Stephen and her avatar, Mrs Ramsay], two children's deaths mark the novel. Prue's death was suggested by that of Woolf's step-sister, Stella Duckworth-Hills, who died in 1897 as a young woman just blossoming when struck down early in marriage. The model for Andrew's death was the loss of Woolf's younger brother, Thoby, who died of typhoid fever in 1906. (610)

This is followed by an explanation for Woolf's fictionalisation of these events:¹⁷

¹⁷ The final events of Prue's life recounted within *To the Lighthouse* are perhaps the least 'fictionalised', since they recall Stella Duckworth almost precisely. Prue is "given in marriage" in "May" and dies "that summer in some illness connected with childbirth" (108). Stella was married in April 1897 and died in July of the same year, though the exact cause remains uncertain. Lee notes that a nurse "had said she had an inverted uterus" and that it was "possible she had been injured by [her husband] Jack's lovemaking" (139). In other parts of the novel, however, there appear to be only faint similarities between Prue and Stella, and more palpable differences. Stella was Julia Stephen's eldest daughter from her first marriage, and the second eldest of the eight siblings. Curtis notes how, even before Julia's death, "Stella was already stepping into her role as Virginia's primary caregiver" (33) and that she eventually became, "with immediate effect, a [twenty-six-year-old] surrogate mother to seven shocked and grieving children" (34). Such devotion is subtly echoed in Prue being "a perfect angel with the others" (*TTL* 49). Prue is also said to take "one's breath away with her beauty" (49), recalling how Stella "was not short of suitors [...] all eager to spend time with this gentle and beautiful woman" (Curtis 32). Such a description corresponds to William Banks conferring onto Stella's avatar the title, "Prue the Fair" for the reason that she "would have beauty" (*TTL* 22). Curtis does, however, note Julia Stephen's "abrupt treatment of the young Stella" which she ascribes to Stella serving "as a permanent visual reminder of the late and loved Herbert" and reminding "Julia at every turn of the grief, suffering and loss that she had endured" (31). Curtis also notes that Julia's "attitude of self-deprivation was [...] expected from Stella, the little daughter who was her mirror image" (31). In *To the Lighthouse*, the one value explicitly said to be inherited by Prue from her mother is beauty, which precipitates the expectations of her being married. During the dinner party Mrs Ramsay acknowledges her daughter in a touching manner:

The displacement from the end of the nineteenth century to a ten-year span reaching from shortly before to shortly after the first great war of modern annihilation gives Woolf the opportunity of generalizing from her personal loss to the cataclysmic losses of Western civilisation. (610)

Woolf seems to have conflated a narrative that is personal to her and one which focuses more on general human experience, which once again recalls Newman's idea of "enriching mutuality" (83). Fact and fiction are combined at this point, the fact informing the events of the narrative and the fiction making it more general and therefore more relatable. Andrew's death takes place during a specific event, but its widespread and long-lasting effects (and Woolf's allusion thereto) attest to her wish to write more for a universal audience than for herself.¹⁸ The position of these three deaths within the context of ubiquitous human suffering

She was just beginning, just moving, just descending. The faintest light was on her face, as if the glow of Minta opposite, some excitement, some anticipation of happiness was reflected in her, as if the sun of the love of men and women rose over the rim of the table-cloth, and without knowing what it was she bent towards and greeted it. She kept looking at Minta, shyly, yet curiously, so that Mrs Ramsay looked from one to the other and said, speaking to Prue in her own mind. You will be as happy as she is one of these days. You will be much happier, she added, because you are my daughter, she meant; her own daughter must be happier than other people's daughters. (89)

Mr Ramsay is also kinder to Prue than Leslie Stephen was to Stella. That she is "leaning on her father's arm" when "given in marriage" (108) creates a sense of intimacy between the two characters, which contradicts Leslie Stephen's view of Stella's marriage "as a great inconvenience and act of selfishness on her part" (Curtis 36). It must be noted that after Julia's death, Stella "was moved uncomfortably but without complaint into the role of surrogate wife for Leslie" (34) and that "Leslie had [so] completely appropriated Stella as a substitute" that "an unnaturally close dependency was forged between the deaf, grieving widower and a step-daughter who had until then been protected from the full blast of his emotions" (Lee, VW 137). Lee also states that their relationship became the basis for Woolf's "analysis of the tyranny and hypocrisy of the Victorian fathers" and that "whenever she writes about the Victorian family home and its after-effects [...] Stella and Leslie provide the blueprint" (138). No tyranny or dependence is evoked in the relationship between Mr Ramsay and Prue, however, with Mr Ramsay only reflecting that "Prue would be a beauty" (*TTL* 58). He does, at one point, respond to Mrs Ramsay's claim that Prue is "going to be far more beautiful" than her by saying he sees "no trace of it" (56), though this might attest to his love for Mrs Ramsay. In the figure of Prue, Woolf seems to be releasing Stella from Julia's expectations, which were possibly unmet, and her step-father's tyranny. Woolf might also be absolving herself from the "excruciating guilt" she "suffered" when looking "back at her behaviour towards her patient half-sister" (Curtis 34). She states in her diary, "I have many regrets; not then, but now I have them; chiefly with regard to Stella" (qtd. in Curtis 34), and also, according to Curtis, expressed some chagrin at her step-sister's engagement (37). After Prue's death, it is said that "nobody deserved happiness more" (*TTL* 108). This reads as another tribute paid by Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, and by making Mr and Mrs Ramsay more sensitive and affectionate to Prue, she seems also to be absolving her own parents of blame.

¹⁸ The First World War and its aftereffects feature often in Woolf's *oeuvre*, as exemplified by the three penultimate chapters of *The Years* (set in 1914, 1917 and 1918), the doomed Jacob Flanders in *Jacob's Room*, and the shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*.

is shown in a reflection from the point of view of Mrs McNab, the cleaning lady who attends to the desolate house:

But dear, many things had changed since then (she shut the drawer); many families had lost their dearest. So she [Mrs Ramsay] was dead; and Mr Andrew killed; and Miss Prue dead too, they said, with her first baby; but everyone had lost someone these years. (*TTL* 111-112)

Here the personal and specific is equated with the general, but description of Mrs Ramsay's death and its aftereffects permeate Mrs McNab's introspection, emphasising the former's status as the novel's most impactful figure. The reflection above on the various deaths is situated between memories of how Mrs Ramsay "had a pleasant way with her" (111) and of "her in her grey cloak" (112). Mrs McNab imagines Mrs Ramsay "with one of the children by her in that grey cloak" which Mrs Ramsay "wore gardening" (111). The appearance and constant mention of this garment emphasises the lingering memory of Mrs Ramsay, and it is by coming to the place which hosts this memory that Lily can find the means to finally capture and come to terms with the figure of Mrs Ramsay. This is reflective of how *To the Lighthouse* was Woolf's "response to the place of her most powerful childhood memories" (Fleishman 607). It is definitely the death of Mrs Ramsay which sets in motion the action of the novel's third part, and at the end of the "Time Passes" Lily is back in the Isle of Skye, and the phrase "here she was again" (117) is indicative of a will to endure on her part. It recalls the end of *Mrs Dalloway*, where the words "there she was" (165) are used to represent the title character's endurance in spite of the overwhelming presence of death, signified by the suicide of Septimus Warren Smith. Lily's endurance is a little different from Clarissa's at this point in *To the Lighthouse*, since the implementation and completion of her painting in "The Window" are the markers of her own particular triumph.

"The great compact": the importance of Cam and James Ramsay in "The Lighthouse"

Of course, it is not only Lily who proves a sense of endurance within *To the Lighthouse*, and attention must be paid to the journey made to the Lighthouse by Mr Ramsay, James and Cam, the youngest of the Ramsay daughters. Cam's various appearances within the novel prove that she can be read as another avatar of Woolf's.¹⁹ Griffin mentions that Woolf "is both Cam

¹⁹ As a child, according to Lee, Woolf often "played up" to an "entertaining, eccentric [and] comical" identity that her "family created for her" (110); she, being very sensitive, made use of "notorious spitefulness [as] a

and Lily, child and adult” (118), and there are various moments which suggest this. The fact that Cam is the “favourite” (*TTL* 73) of William Bankes, Lily Briscoe’s hopeful fiancé, proves that both daughter and artist can be read as counterparts, and reducing them to types such as these proves their symbolic connection. There is one striking moment in “The Window” where, under the gaze of William Bankes, Cam almost runs into Lily while she is painting, grazing “the easel by an inch” (46). Daughter and woman-artist collide in this instance in the presence of a character whose esteem for both connects them. If both are counterparts *and* avatars for Woolf, then this moment might also represent the young Woolf coming into contact with the rebellious artist she will become, and their connection in this regard is emphasised by their both responding quite defiantly to oppressive patriarchal figures. The following description of Cam also implies a connection with Lily:

[S]he would not stop for her father, whom she grazed also by an inch; nor for her mother, who called ‘Cam! I want you a moment!’ as she dashed past. She was off like a bird, bullet, or arrow, impelled by what desire, shot by whom, at what directed, who could say? What, what? Mrs Ramsay pondered, watching her. It might be a vision—of a shell, of a wheelbarrow, of a fairy kingdom on the far side of the hedge; or it might be the glory of speed; no one knew. But when Mrs Ramsay called ‘Cam!’ a second time, the projectile dropped in mid-career, and Cam came lagging back, pulling a leaf by the way, to her mother. (46)

Cam’s possible “vision” herein is interrupted and might, therefore, correspond to the vision Lily is trying to capture in her painting, since it is the intrusion of someone, particularly Mr Ramsay, into her artistic space that she is most threatened by:

Never was anybody so ridiculous and so alarming. But so long as he [Mr Ramsay] kept like that, waving, she was safe; he would not stand still and look at her picture. And that was what Lily Briscoe could not have endured. Even while she looked at the mass, at the line, at the colour, at Mrs Ramsay sitting in the window with James, she kept a feeler on her surroundings lest someone should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at. (18)

weapon against humiliation” (110); and she exhibited an “appetite for performance” and a “passionate need for solitude and independence” (113). While the description of Cam Ramsay as “wild and fierce” (21) could relate in certain ways to all these behavioural tendencies, it does seem to reduce them as well. It might be easier to say that Cam exhibits a typical child’s personality and to steer her further from Woolf as a real person and nearer to Woolf’s other symbolic avatar, Lily Briscoe.

It is only William Bankes she can tolerate looking at her work. To her, “Mr Bankes [is] less alarming than any other” (45). It seems that the intrusion of the father-figure is what bothers Lily most, and this is echoed, as we shall see, in “The Window”. She is, on the other hand, fixated on the mother-figure, and this discrepancy seems to recall the above description of Cam. While the young girl will “not stop” for either parent, she seems more indifferent to her father’s presence than to her mother, who she eventually obeys. There is a bedtime scene later, in which Mrs Ramsay evinces a calming effect on her youngest daughter when she uses her shawl to conceal a frightening pig’s skull kept in the youngest children’s bedroom, and helps Cam imagine

how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird’s nest; it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes...She could see the words echoing as she spoke them rhythmically in Cam’s mind, and Cam was repeating after her how it was like a mountain, a bird’s nest, a garden (93)

If the outdoor scene subtly implies Cam’s preference of the mother over the father, and if the bedtime scene amplifies this preference, then this aspect of Cam’s characterisation extends cohesively into other aspects of the text. Firstly, any implied resistance she has against her father is made explicit in “The Lighthouse”. Secondly, this resistance and the greater love she has for her mother corresponds to Lily’s resistance of the father-figure and her overwhelming adoration for the mother-figure, further evidence that the two can be read as counterparts. In fact, Woolf’s dual symbolic appearances within the novel prove that *To the Lighthouse* is also partly about her relationship with her father. As will be demonstrated, Cam’s journey to the Lighthouse with Mr Ramsay is a means of coming to terms with the father-figure, while Lily’s simultaneous focus on her painting and avoidance of Mr Ramsay is a means for her to come to terms with the mother-figure.

Newman states that, in “The Lighthouse”, the characters “who have returned, diminished in number, saddened in spirit, are fixed intently on the past” (92). James and Cam are particularly fixed on a tyrannical image of their father that they have maintained since childhood, and which they interpret as the reason for their going to the Lighthouse:

He [Mr Ramsay] had made them come. He had forced them to come. In their anger they hoped that the breeze would never

rise, that he might be thwarted in every possible way, since he forced them to come against their wills. (*TTL* 134)

Both Cam and James have “vowed, in silence,” to “resist tyranny” (134), as personified by their father. It is James, however, who is shown to bear more anger towards his father, which takes us back to the beginning of *To the Lighthouse*, where Mr Ramsay’s insistence that the eponymous journey will not occur has a pertinent effect on his youngest son:

Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children’s breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically (7)

The imagery extends to James’s “old symbol” of “taking a knife and striking his father to the heart” (150), a precise act of vengeance, considering Mr Ramsay’s knife-like “presence” in the beginning. James does, however, note a difference between the past and present images of his father:

Only now, as he grew older, and sat staring at his father in an impotent rage, it was not him, that old man reading, whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that descended on him—without his knowing perhaps: that fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck at you (he could feel the beak on his bare legs, where it had struck when he was a child) and then made off, and there he was again, an old man, very sad, reading his book. That he would kill, that he would strike to the heart. (150-151)

The “harpy” image refers to the still elusive childhood memory that serves as the source of James’s “hatred” (151). His seeking “an image to cool and detach and round off his feeling in a concrete shape” (151) recalls Lily using a “triangular purple shape” (45) in order to capture the essence of her artistic subject, Mrs Ramsay. Like Lily, who uses the memory of laying “her head on Mrs Ramsay’s lap” (43) in an attempt to locate the essence of her subject, James uses memory to locate the fundamental reason for his resentment towards Mr Ramsay. The reason does eventually surface, and we are reminded of the novel’s opening:

Something, he remembered, stayed and darkened over him [James]; would not move; something flourished up in the air,

something arid and sharp descended even there, like a blade, a scimitar, smiting through the leaves and flowers even of that happy world and making them shrivel and fall.

‘It will rain,’ he remembered his father saying. ‘You won’t be able to go to the Lighthouse.’ (152)

This moment and the scene right at the beginning of the novel are connected, not only by Mr Ramsay’s remembered utterance, but also by the mention of the “blade” to which he has already been compared. It is this action of his father’s that has left James in the same state of mental stagnation implied by Mrs Ramsay when she says that he “will remember” Mr Ramsay’s persistent yet insensitive truthfulness “all his life” (52). Of course, Mrs Ramsay’s assertion is not entirely accurate, as James has had some difficulty locating this exact memory, but his anger has still rendered him incapable of curing his childhood resentment and moving beyond it point. The memory is described as “a rope” which seems “to bind him” to this earlier moment, and which “his father” has “knotted” (153). The relationship between him and the Lighthouse is implied to be distant, with his current view of it in its concreteness contrasting against the one remembered from his past, which is more distant:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening.
Now—

He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. (152)

James seems incapable of uniting the slowly approaching image of the Lighthouse in its actuality with his image of it as a child. James stares “at the Lighthouse, powerless to move, powerless to flick off these grains of misery which settled on his mind one after another” (153). He seems fixated only on a distant view of the Lighthouse he had as a child, and this recalls Mr Ramsay’s stagnation in preferring the “view” of “the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst” (14). For James, there is a feeling of anger that is concomitant with this past image, and it is only, as we shall see, by getting to the Lighthouse that he will experience the release of this emotion, a moment that affects not only him, but his sister as well.

Cam's presence during the journey emphasises the need for the daughter-figure to overcome her anger at the image of the tyrannical father, and marks both the fictional and autobiographical agendas Woolf incorporates within *To the Lighthouse*. Her anger at Mr Ramsay is made evident when she considers:

that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms, so that even now she woke in the night trembling with rage and remembered some command of his; some insolence: 'Do this,' 'Do that,' his dominance: his 'Submit to me.' (140)

Though she and James have "vowed" to "carry out" what is termed "the great compact", i.e. resisting "tyranny to the death" (134), she very slowly comes to accept and admire her father. Her first positive acknowledgement comes after Macalister, in whose boat they make the journey, tells them about three ships sinking during "a great storm at Christmas" (135). She considers that her father "would have launched the lifeboat" and "reached the wreck", calling him "brave" and "adventurous" (136). The acknowledgement is instantly countered by her remembering the "compact", and she proves to be "weighed" down by the "grievance" (136) she and James share. Such wording reiterates the idea that both are trapped at a certain point by their resentment, though James is the more tenacious of the two, noticing that Cam, due to her "sad, sulky, yielding" demeanour will ultimately "never resist tyranny to the death" (138). It is understandable that James should be the child most noticeably affected by reaching the Lighthouse, since Mr Ramsay's effect on him has been evident throughout the novel and their particular shared dynamic forms a substantial part of the novel's fictional narrative. In a later moment, while James is steering, Macalister commends him for "doing very well" and "keeping [the boat] very steady", but Mr Ramsay's silence rouses further upset in James, who "never" feels "praised" by his father (166). James's entire train of thought in "The Lighthouse" is marked by dissatisfaction at his father's treatment of him, but this feeling is eventually overcome a moment before reaching the Lighthouse, when Mr Ramsay "triumphantly" says, "Well done!" to him (168). David Daiches asserts that "Mr Ramsay, by his praise of James's handling of the boat, is exorcising the ghost of James's early resentment" (102), much in the same way that Lily and Woolf are trying to exorcise the ghosts of Mrs Ramsay and Julia Stephen, respectively. It seems minor, but this "fulfillment of paternal promise" (Harrington 376) is made pertinent for two reasons. The first is Cam's reaction to it:

There! Cam thought, addressing herself silently to James.
You've got it at last. For she knew that this was what James had
been wanting, and she knew that now he had got it he was so
pleased that he would not look at her or his father or at anyone.
There he sat with his hand on the tiller sitting bolt upright,
looking rather sulky and frowning slightly. He was so pleased
that he was not going to let anybody take away a grain of his
pleasure. His father had praised him. They must think that he
was perfectly indifferent. But you've got it now, Cam thought.
(*TTL* 168)

The release of James's resentment marks a climactic moment in the fictional part of the novel, and Cam's recognition of it indicates its autobiographical side. If the moment was written only for fictional purposes then Cam, who has had far less interaction with her father than James has in the novel, would seem out of place. If it were only Cam and Mr Ramsay present in this section, then reparation between the two characters, a father and a daughter, would make Woolf's novel seem too personal, and one of her goals is a more expansive depiction of human experience. In a similar way to that in which Lily and Mrs Ramsay represent Woolf and her mother at a distance and in a way that is not unduly personal, Cam's presence in "The Lighthouse" is a means for Woolf to pay tribute to her father in a distant, and perhaps relatively objective, manner. Cam's acknowledgement almost represents the autobiographical aspect of *To the Lighthouse* recognising its easy transposition into a fictional context. Cam's gradual acceptance of her father in "The Lighthouse" parallels Woolf's aforementioned movement towards a gentler depiction of Leslie Stephen in her *oeuvre*. It is as if she is forgiving his "failures as a father" while having recognised, in earlier moments, "his importance as a thinker" (Lewis 191). The second reason Mr Ramsay's praise of James is amplified is that it occurs just as they are about to land at the Lighthouse, an action representing endurance and a completed journey away from the place of their stagnation in "The Window". The completion of the voyage is a point at which "all the threads of the story" (Daiches 102) come together. Not only do "James and Cam connect with their father" but Mr Ramsay's coming to the Lighthouse is done in "memory" (Beja 225) of Mrs Ramsay. By making the journey he has honoured her active impulses, and possibly her charitable inclinations as well, given the numerous parcels he brings along. There is a moment when, "in complete readiness to land" he looks "back the island" (*TTL* 168), proving to himself the extent of his endurance. The last description of him, from the point of view of

his now gratified children, instils within the reader a sense of his triumph and spiritual renewal:

He rose and stood in the bow of the boat, very straight tall, for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, 'There is no God,' and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space, and they both rose to follow him as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding parcel, on to the rock. (169)

Such an image of Mr Ramsay, coupled with his "giving long withheld praise to his son" (Harrington 376), parallels Lily's cathartic completion of her painting.

"I have had my vision": the completion of Lily's painting

In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf situates the writing of *To the Lighthouse* within the context of her own life, saying that "until [she] was in the forties [...] the presence of [her] mother obsessed [her]" (80) but that "when it was written [she] ceased to be obsessed" (81). Woolf began writing the novel "on 6 August 1925" (Lee, VW 477), when she was 43, and it was published in 1927 when she was 45. This corresponds to Lily being "forty-four" (124) at the time of her completing her second painting. When we first encounter her in "The Lighthouse" she is avoiding the presence of Mr Ramsay, who makes "it impossible for her to do anything" (123). That he eventually leaves for the expedition with Cam is indicative of Woolf dividing herself between the tasks of coming to terms with both mother and father, though it is the first that holds the greater emotional weight. The journey is actually pertinent to Lily's painting, which in turn increases its importance to Woolf's novel. After Lily hopes "it [will] be calm enough for them to land at the Lighthouse" she exclaims, "The Lighthouse! The Lighthouse!" (125), a marker of her realising how she can create unity and balance in her painting. She recalls her difficulty in this regard, and her resolve to "move" a "tree to the middle" (122) of the artwork in order to solve it. A reflection of Lily's in "The Window" is recalled:

It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken. (46)

This painting was "never finished" (122), and in her second attempt Lily completes her painting by drawing "a line [...], in the centre" (170) just after noticing that Mr Ramsay "has

landed” (169). This recalls Woolf justifying her addition of “The Lighthouse” to the text by saying that, “one has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together” (SL 228). Harrington asserts that “the line represents the lighthouse” (364) and the confluence of both the painting and the expedition being completed almost simultaneously attests to this. Harrington also notes that “the line unifies the formal design of the painting, as the lighthouse does the design of the narrative” (370), so Lily’s incorporation of the Lighthouse into her painting at this climactic moment is reflective of Woolf using the expedition to the Lighthouse in her novel to amplify the triumph and catharsis achieved by Lily in her completion of the painting. Lily’s feelings regarding Mrs Ramsay catalyse her implementation of the artwork, and it is also with memory that she is able to capture her vision of Mrs Ramsay. Her painting is actually equated with reminiscence, since she is described as dipping “into the blue paint” and “into the past” (TTL 141), and as “tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past” (142). When beginning her painting, Lily recalls a “scene on the beach”, during which Charles Tansley “became as nice as he could possibly be”, and these two characters, previously quite hostile to each other, got on “very well” while “Mrs Ramsay [was] watching them” (132). In Lily’s mind, all “seemed to depend somehow upon Mrs Ramsay sitting under [a] rock, with a pad on her knee, writing letters” (132) and her reflection continues:

But what a power was in the human soul! she thought. That woman sitting there, writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite (she [Lily] and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful) something—this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking—which survived all these years complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and it stayed in the mind almost like a work of art. (133)

This particular memory seems to allow Lily a means to reimagine, or “refashion”, Charles Tansley. Just before this recollection she is once again tormented by the memory of his mantra, “woman can’t paint, can’t write” (132), but her negative image of him is attenuated afterwards. This recalls the aforementioned idea of a memory corresponding to one facet of a person’s character, and maybe in remembering both Tansley’s condescension as well as his pleasantness, Lily has a fuller image of his personality. In likening this more rounded image

of Tansley to “a work of art”, Lily seems to be contradicting the idea of capturing “the essential thing” (42) in her painting. It is perhaps not one defining aspect that she needs to depict, but rather an effectual amalgamation of various characteristics.

Lily makes a step towards this realisation in the following passage:

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps did never come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs Ramsay saying ‘Life stand still here’; Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this external passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was stuck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs Ramsay said. ‘Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!’ she repeated. She owed this revelation to her. (133)

The “great revelation” mentioned at the beginning refers, I think, to the ever elusive “essential thing”, which corresponds to Mrs Ramsay’s “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (52). The “little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” correspond, in Mrs Ramsay’s case, to the “apparitions” (52) which revolve around that “core”, and which only offer others a glimpse into facets of her character. The “revelation” Lily owes to her is the knowledge that it is not Mrs Ramsay’s essence that needs to be captured. Instead, Mrs Ramsay *is* the essence of that which surrounds her. Her authoritative presence in the beach scene, during which all “seemed to depend somehow upon” (132) her, proves how essential she is, at least in the mind of the woman enamoured of her. The image of a “shape” in “the midst of chaos” both corresponds to the “triangular purple shape” (45) in Lily’s first painting and reiterates how Mrs Ramsay’s aim is to unify whatever “chaos” surrounds her, as proven at the beginning of the dinner party. This in turn recalls Woolf’s description, in “A Sketch of the Past”, of Julia Stephen as the very centre “of that great Cathedral space which was childhood” (81). Both Julia and Mrs Ramsay are essences in themselves for Woolf and Lily, respectively, and Lily does later call out “Mrs Ramsay” to what is described as “that essence” (*TTL* 146).

There are three particular utterances of Mrs Ramsay's name, each made by Lily with an increased level of emotion. Each seems to parallel particular points reached by her husband and youngest children during the journey to the Lighthouse. The first, at the end of the passage describing "the great revelation", occurs just after they set off; the second, the middle utterance, occurs when they are "half-way across the bay" (149); and the third occurs just before the climactic landing. This last utterance is particularly pertinent, since it succeeds Lily noticing an "odd-shaped triangular shadow" (164) on the step in front of the house's drawing room. The "triangular purple shape" from "The Window" is immediately recalled, and consequently the intangible Mrs Ramsay. Harrington notes that "balance is achieved by the reintroduction of the triangle, and with the balance Lily's original focus is restored" (369). I would agree with this claim insofar as it suggests that the abstract means by which Lily wishes to depict Mrs Ramsay is recalled, and so her presence can be delineated for both honorary and cathartic reasons. It seems that Lily has moved from realising that Mrs Ramsay's essential nature is what makes her so vivid, to finding a way of transposing that image of her into her artwork. Distance forms a substantial part of these various epiphanies. It is "distance", which has "extraordinary power" (*TTL* 154) for Lily, who reflects on how "so much depends [...] upon distance" and "whether people are near us or far from us" (156). These reflections point to her feelings for Mrs Ramsay. There is now temporal distance between the two women, given the ten-year gap between "The Window" and "The Lighthouse", and the sense of this distance is of course heightened by Mrs Ramsay's death. That Lily's hesitation in "The Window" and her eventual completion of the painting at the end of the novel are separated by Mrs Ramsay's death reveals how Lily is able to relieve herself of her attachment to Mrs Ramsay. This parallels Woolf's attempt to exorcise "her love-hate feelings for her mother" (Moore 82). Distance also affects Lily's consideration for Charles Tansley, who she now remembers in a slightly more ambivalent and less disdainful manner. While recognising the spatial distance between herself and Mr Ramsay, her "feeling" for him "[changes] as he [sails] further" (*TTL* 156), and spatial distance is pertinent for Mr Ramsay as well, since by "looking back at the island" (168) after reaching the Lighthouse he is struck by his own fulfilment.

Conclusion

The various kinds of distance depicted in "The Lighthouse" seem to present a means by which various characters can come to terms with the multifaceted personalities of others.

Even James, after the lengthy journey, notices how his father looks “as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both their mind—that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things” (165). In making this comparison, James seems to be identifying a new aspect of his father’s character, and the fact that he sees it in himself as well suggests recognition of his own ambivalent nature. The final moments of *To the Lighthouse* involve characters coming to terms with the “rainbow-like intangibility” which Woolf associates with “personality” (NB 186). In addition, the healed dynamics between these characters are evidence of the confluence between autobiography and fiction Woolf achieves within the novel. The events which mark the climax of the novel’s fictional narrative are Mr Ramsay’s praise of his son and their eventual landing at the Lighthouse; Cam’s acknowledgement of this repaired father-son dynamic; and Lily’s triumphant completion of her painting. They all, however, signify Woolf’s incorporation of cathartic autobiography in the novel, as well as her demonstration of the difficulty in depicting personality precisely.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's awareness of the patriarchal and one-sided nature of Victorian biography catalysed a preoccupation with life-writing that extended throughout her career. In criticising this expansive genre she highlighted its discrepancies with regard to the depiction of men and women, and its tendency to focus solely on the achievements of its subject. These concerns permeate her various experiments with biography, but what is most notable about her entire *oeuvre* is her progressive consideration of how best to depict character within life-writing. She advocates combining aspects of fact and fiction in order to arrive closer at the essence of a subject's personality. She also uses this combination to demonstrate the effectiveness of balancing male and female thinking, which she associates with fact and fiction respectively, and the achievement of this balance equates to adopting what Woolf terms "the androgynous mind" (AROO 128). All three texts incorporate this particular concept, with the relationships between Terence and Rachel, Orlando and Marmaduke, and Mr and Mrs Ramsay all exemplifying a union between male and female patterns of thought. The various depictions of, and dynamics between, intersexual relationships in these novels also attest to Woolf's incorporation of social, feminist and gender-related concerns into her works. Rachel Vinrace and Lily Briscoe are torn between the pressures of social conformity and a wish to rebel against it, while Orlando's ambivalent sexuality is reflective of the ambivalence Woolf perceived in personality. Woolf's depictions of these women also attest to the metafictional quality of her literature. Rachel vacillates between social convention *and* literary convention, and is a character Woolf uses to demonstrate stereotypical literary depictions of women in general. Orlando's inability to conform to stereotypical aspects of one particular gender not only reflects the complexities of personality as Woolf perceived them, but relates to *Orlando's* failure to conform to the one-sidedness of Victorian biography, which it is trying to emulate. Lily Briscoe, as a painter trying to capture another person's essence, mirrors Woolf, who strove to capture the essence of personality throughout her *oeuvre*. In addition, Lily is trying to capture the essence of an impactful mother-figure in a novel Woolf writes in order to come to terms with her own mother.

While these three texts are homogenous with regard to the concerns mentioned above, Woolf's biographical agenda, the incorporation of fact and fiction for the purpose of depicting character, is markedly different in each of them. *The Voyage Out* considers the ubiquity of biography and autobiography in everyday discourse. Rachel's description of Mr

Pepper, and his amendment of it, demonstrates the discrepancy between these two genres in terms of their accuracy. The scenario actually problematizes biographical documentation in conversation as well as literature. Characters also construct images of themselves for others, often with a degree of self-consciousness that no doubt impedes upon the accuracy of that construction. The novel actually includes situations in which framed images of people in reflections or portraits are presented as inaccurate depictions, and Woolf resurrects this particular trope in several other novels. What *The Voyage Out* demonstrates is the constant tendency of humans to depict themselves and each other. The possible inaccuracy of such depictions and the constant self-consciousness they induce problematizes them and the documentation of people in general. Rachel Vinrace's education in the novel is a means for her both to become a more judicious biographer of others and to construct a multifaceted and non-stereotypical identity for herself. Her guides towards this goal include men and women whose particular thought patterns respectively represent fact and fiction, *and* a suitor, Terence Hewet, whose apparent ability to unite the two promises to influence her in this regard. Rachel's conformity to a prescribed social role, however, inhibits the completion of this education and her death is an explicit means undertaken by Woolf to save her from the confining Edwardian social positions of wife and mother. Woolf takes an objective stance in *The Voyage Out* with regard to biographical documentation, male and female dynamics in Edwardian society, and the union of fact and fiction. She actually seems to be initiating a discussion on these interlinking issues which extends throughout her *oeuvre*, expanding upon them and dealing with them in different ways in each text.

Orlando and *To the Lighthouse* are more explicit considerations of the cohesion that exists between biography or autobiography and fiction. The former novel represents Woolf's explicit critique and subversion of Victorian biographical writing. She uses the life of a real person, Vita Sackville-West, in order to substantiate various aspects of her protagonist's life, such as his/her literary inclinations, sprawling family estate, legal battles over that estate, and exotic familial connections. There is of course Vita's sexual ambivalence, and her husband's homosexuality, which inform Woolf's ambivalent characterisation of Orlando and Marmaduke. However, Woolf inserts all this factual information into a fantastical narrative which is presented very self-consciously as a traditional biography. In doing so, she confronts the biographers of her father's era by demonstrating the effects of using fact as merely a basis for the fantastical, multifaceted and beguiling portrayal of a biographical subject. In reading *Orlando* we are aware that Vita Sackville-West has inspired its content, but her fictional

characterisation exposes us rather to the less easily definable aspects of her personality. For example, Orlando's longevity and the subtle factually informed references to Vita's ancestry conflate to emphasise her inheritance of various personal idiosyncrasies from multiple eras. Woolf's biographical agenda is not confined to depicting Vita. In problematizing the accuracy expected of numerous types of literary documentation, such as journalistic pamphlets, letters, diaries and historical tragedies, she seems to be dissuading the reader from investing too loyally in any kind of historical documentation. Woolf also pertinently confronts literature's inability to capture the essence of character, though in Orlando's encounter with Alexander Pope she does imply that a person's works are a better means to assess his or her character. This points to Woolf's emphasis on fiction as a notable means of capturing character, and this once again highlights the necessity of fiction in substantiating that which is merely factual. Of course, Woolf's focus in *Orlando* is also the essence of personality. She problematizes the means to attain it in writing by highlighting the "variety of selves" (213) that ultimately obscure the essence of Orlando's personality. In fact, Woolf implies that these multiple "selves" are an easier means to arrive closer to a subject's personality, and that the essence is actually unattainable.

Woolf suggests this more explicitly in *To the Lighthouse*, whose function is the combination of autobiography and fiction to generalise human experience, achieve catharsis for both author and reader, and once again problematize the depiction of a subject. The transposition of Thoby Stephen's death to a World War I context is perhaps the most explicit means by which Woolf makes her novel relatable to her readers. Woolf also creates two avatars for herself in the novel. Lily Briscoe is not only the rebellious female artist figure we have encountered in another guise (Rachel Vinrace), but is also representative of Woolf coming to terms with her mother. Cam Ramsay is also rebellious, but she appears as a means for Woolf to pay tribute to her father. Lily's completion of her painting and Cam's eventual acceptance of her father, are fictional scenarios which represent "Woolf's final laying to rest of the influence of her parents on her life" (McCracken 59). Characters also have difficulty in assessing the personalities of the people they eventually come to terms with. Lily cannot depict the essence of Mrs Ramsay's character, while Cam and James Ramsay are so focused on their father's apparent tyranny that they cannot, at first, see beyond that one particular facet of his personality. What they realise, however, is that personality is multifaceted. Instead of each parent-figure being presented in one particular way, the roundedness of their characters is stressed. Lily can only complete her painting by realising that Mrs Ramsay is an

essence, and one comprised of various personal idiosyncrasies. This reflects Woolf's view of her mother as a multifaceted individual. Lily's epiphany at the end of *To the Lighthouse* parallels the recognition of Orlando's "variety of selves" and at the end of both texts Woolf posits that personality cannot be described in terms of an essence, but must be presented as fluid, ambivalent and many-sided. Such a position corrects the tendencies of Victorian biographers to depict their subjects in decided, fixed and one-dimensional terms.

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