The Harmonious Paradox of Virginia Woolf

by

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Abstract

This essay is an exploration of the nature of Virginia Woolf in relation to her literary works. It is an attempt to give an objective and factual outlook on her life through her biography and writing, as well as providing a variety of perspectives from critics and friends. With this eclectic approach to research, it is hoped that she will come to be viewed as more than just the feminist writer she is primarily remembered as today, and that some of the seeming paradoxes of her character will resolve into a harmony that makes sense, revealing the complexity behind the genius that is too often recognized only from a limited perspective or particular standpoint.
Author's Statement

My first experience with the writing of Virginia Woolf outside her well-known feminist essay "A Room of One's Own" was at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, where I read twentieth century British literature. To the Lighthouse was the very first novel I read while in England, and I was immediately taken with Woolf's writing. The more I read of her, the more I wanted to know the thoughts and motivations behind the artist. Since I only had eight weeks at Harris Manchester, I was inspired to continue reading and studying Woolf back at Ball State, and was awarded an Undergraduate Fellowship to do so. This not only allowed me to take back a significant memory of Oxford and let it evolve here in Muncie, but it gave me the opportunity to continue learning about Woolf, and to extend my thoughts and ideas into an honors thesis.

I would like to thank Dr. Joanne Edmonds for her tremendous support and enthusiasm for the project, which was unfailing throughout. I could not have done this work without her recommendation of books, the ideas and directions she gave me in writing, and the help in improving upon what was written--and most of all, I'd like to thank her for giving me the opportunity to study intensively an author who has meant so much to me; it has truly been a memorable experience.
"It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (Jacob's Room 154). So writes Virginia Woolf in 1922, and so I think to myself now in the attempt to conjure up a picture of the great novelist, poet, feminist, genius. Fortunately, many others have expressed similar sentiments of ambivalence in regards to the understanding of Woolf's mind, person, and writing. There is a certain acceptance of the enigmatic nature of the author which extends into the complexity of her work, and with this often comes the concession to simply leave it for what it is—the idea that the beauty of her work lies within the irreducible quality, and that perhaps some of her works cannot be fully understood because the author did not intend them to be. And while some critics have confidently voiced their theories, every contention or supposed certainty with Woolf is going to be subject to the inconsistencies within, ranging from minor discrepancies in thought to the seeming paradoxes of her character: Was she depressed or was she spirited? Was she sensitive to criticism or not? Did she cherish life or did she hold existence in contempt? The answer to all these questions is a resounding and harmonious "yes."

"Take care, therefore, in denouncing contradictories: they may be somebody's truth" (Smith 98). In many ways, these words
of warning from Huston Smith sum up the supposition one must take when examining someone as complex as Virginia Woolf. Such an undertaking often necessitates the acceptance of certain paradoxes in character, since they are bound to exist in matters (or minds) of such complexity. The existence of these paradoxes should not give the impression that Woolf can properly be diagnosed with a split personality, bipolar disorder, or any other such labelled affliction; such conclusions are too simple and too speculative. Rather, Woolf necessitates an ideographic approach: to account for the individual characteristics which fail to adhere to any labels, and to reveal the unique and multifarious character that rises up from a sea of obscurity and contradiction, in solidarity.

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Trollope, Emerson, and Darwin died; Stravinsky, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf were born. Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen to Leslie and Julia Stephen at No. 22 Hyde Park Gate, London, in 1882. Perhaps one of the most significant impacts on her character begins with the nature of her relationships with her family members. Historically speaking, Woolf is the product of two very different parents—in terms of both social rank and definitive character traits. Her father Leslie was known as one of the Stephen family intellectuals, stemming from a long line of bold writers and thinkers strong in argument and factual knowledge. Her mother was of the line of Patties, who were
chiefly remembered for their unique beauty rather than for their intellectual prowess (Bell Vol. I, 19). This amalgamation of an objective intellectual capability from her father with a more subjective gift from her mother seems to have found its ideal form in the genius of Virginia Woolf.

The interest of her family history extends far beyond her parents. Much of Woolf's history seems to be riddled with bizarre and traumatic events. For instance, her cousin, a bright young scholar named J.K. Stephen, suddenly went mad and died when Virginia was only ten (Bell Vol. I, 35). Laura, her half-sister (the daughter of Leslie Stephen and Harriet Marian, one of Thackeray's daughters) seems to have inherited madness from Mrs. Thackeray, and eventually went to an asylum in New York (Bell Vol. I, 22). And the infamous George Duckworth, who is known for being anything from slightly overbearing and silly to sexually deviant and repulsive, is referred to often by Woolf throughout her memoirs and diaries. It seems that Virginia, Vanessa (her sister), and Leonard Woolf (whom Virginia married in 1912) all blamed George Duckworth for her frigidity. Woolf herself describes him in "A Sketch of the Past" as both "brainless" and as having "an abundance of feeling" (MOB 152). In "22 Hyde Park Gate," she recounts one night when they returned from a risqué French play (which was a great embarrassment for all the company involved):

I went up to my room, took off my beautiful white
satin dress, and unfastened the three pink carnations which had been pinned to my breast by the Jew's harp...

I felt old and experienced and disillusioned and angry, amused and excited, full of mystery, alarm and bewilderment... Ah, how pleasant it would be to stretch out in bed, fall asleep and forget them all!

And then the door creaked open—"Don't be frightened," George whispered. "And don't turn on the light, oh beloved. Beloved—" and he flung himself on my bed, and took me in his arms. (MOB 177)

According to Quentin Bell, Vanessa believed George mostly unaware of his lewd actions—what began as sympathy for their mother's death had escalated into a "nasty erotic skirmish" (Vol. 1, 43). George had always been known for the lavishing of affections, but the tragic death of their mother seemed to give him license to take these affections beyond the nebulous line which neither of the sisters could distinctly define. And after all, who could they tell without the risk of entering into a scandal? As Bell notes, "Stella, Leslie, and the aunts—-all would have been bewildered, horrified, indignant and incredulous" (Vol. 1, 43).

But the death of Julia Stephen carried with it even more tragedy than might be expected from the loss of a mother and the subsequent fondling sympathies of a demented, melodramatic half-brother. It brought about a gloom over No. 22 Hyde Park Gate
under which any happiness seemed indecent amidst perpetual mourning. Leslie demanded constant sympathy and made it his quest to be as somber and miserable as possible in memory of his second wife—his avowed intention was to "speak of Julia without mentioning her name," and he lived this credo to the fullest, making everyone else miserable along the way (Diary Vol. 3, 164). Perhaps this kind of experience is what led Woolf to talk about sympathy as she does in her essay, "On Being Ill:"

But sympathy we cannot have. Wisest Fate says no. If her children, weighted as they already are with sorrow, were to take on them that burden too, adding in imagination other pains to their own, buildings would cease to rise; roads would peter into grassy tracks; there would be an end of music and of paintings; one great sigh alone would rise to Heaven, and the only attitudes for men and women would be those of horror and despair. (Moment 12)

Although Woolf was in many ways resentful towards her father for his childish bereavement and inability to carry on [Bell notes that she was also "consumed with silent indignation" at her father for acting the part of a financially ruined man (Vol. I, 63)], there were moments of deep affection between them. And Woolf's affections for her family members often seemed to vacillate between emotional extremes. In Moments of Being she remembers a "passionate affection for my father alternating with
passionate hatred of him" (183). It was Leslie, after all, who gave her free reign over his vast library. And he was certainly proud of his daughter from very early on—in a letter to C.E. Norton, Leslie writes:

Miss Virginia, aged 2.5, scratches her brother, aged 4. I insist upon and ultimately obtain an apology or kiss. She looks very thoughtful for some time and then says, Papa, why have we got nails? There is a bit of infantile teleology for you. (Bell Vol. I, 23-4)

And despite any differences or feelings of ambivalence toward her parents, Woolf certainly did grieve at the loss of both of them. The death of her mother is often thought to be the cause of her first breakdown, although, as Bell notes, "The real horror of Julia's death came in the mourning of her" (Vol. I, 40). And Woolf herself admitted many years later in "Sketch of the Past," "It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four" (MOB 81). When her father died, she experienced a kind of maniacal grief in which she began to mistrust even Vanessa, and which ultimately resulted in her first attempt to commit suicide (Bell Vol. I, 89-90).

Vanessa was certainly one of the closest people to Virginia, and Woolf often refers to her throughout her diary as one of the few people she felt she could turn to. Alix Strachey recollects
that "[Virginia] always looked to Vanessa for a feeling of security, even during her married life" (Noble 114). And yet the nature of their relationship had many turns as well. Certain jealous rivalries existed between Virginia and Vanessa in a wide variety of forms. Often it might simply be some resentment about clothes, or as with this scenario:

Someone said in her presence that it must be very tiring for her sister, a painter, to stand long hours at the easel. Virginia, outraged, I suppose, by the insinuation that her sister's occupation was in any way more exacting than her own, went out at once and bought a tall desk at which she insisted on standing to write. (Noble 71)

At other times there was a deeper kind of jealousy involving Vanessa's success as a mother; she had that maternal, nurturing quality that Woolf seemed to lack. Speaking on Vanessa, Angus Davidson notes also that "she was more calm and composed, also more practical: she sewed beautifully, she was a good driver, she could cook if required, whereas I don't believe Virginia did any of these things" (Noble 57). The extent to which there may have been some sense of competition between the two on this level is noted by Woolf in her diary, June 1929, in which she begins spontaneously to speak as she imagines Vanessa might:

My elder son is coming tomorrow; yes, and he is the most promising young man in King's; and has
been speaking at the Apostles dinner. All I can oppose that with is, And I made 2,000 [pounds] and can bring Leonard here and buy a house if I want. (Vol. 3, 232)

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It is interesting to examine the nature of some of Woolf's familial relationships on the level of the characters that she created, since her family had such a significant influence on her as a person and as a writer. Perhaps the most autobiographical of her works is *To the Lighthouse*, considered by most critics to be her finest achievement. Vanessa writes to her upon reading it:

Anyhow it seemed to me in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do....You have given father too I think as clearly... (Bell, Vol. II 128)

Woolf certainly portrays Mrs. Ramsay as the one who brought a sense of happiness and connectedness to the family, which can be felt in spirit even after she is gone. In doing this, she makes a direct parallel between Mrs. Ramsay and her mother not only on
an emotional level, but a contextual one--some of her most powerful memories of her mother stem directly from her fondest childhood memories at St. Ives, a place that carried with it the same kind of youthful mystique and idealism that the lighthouse represents in the book. By resurrecting her mother in this way, perhaps she is bringing back that spirit of connectedness she wished to exist within her family by allowing it to exist in the novel. It does seem that the disconnection between her and her father are even further exacerbated after her mother's death, and the portrayal of Mr. Ramsay in relation to her father seems to be indicative of this.

Mr. Ramsay is seen, as Leslie was often seen by Woolf, as a tyrant; but a tyrant without much of a spine, or at least not until he had the assurance of others' respect and support. Note the similarity between her father and the character of Mr. Ramsay here:

It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life. (Hanson 75, from TTL)

Woolf even goes so far as to have Mr. Ramsay picking up Walter Scott to read again, out of a kind of empathy for the great man who might one day be forgotten--which is Mr. Ramsay's own worst
fear, especially with the realization that his passing could never leave the mark of true genius, for he could never reach "Z." (TTL 40). And we find Woolf a bit contemptuous of Leslie at one point for taking Scott so seriously: "Almost incredible that my father should have taken this scene seriously" (Diary Vol. 4, 41). [It is also interesting to note that Leslie had written an essay entitled "Sir Walter Scott" in his Hours in a Library.]

Vanessa closely parallels the character of Lily Briscoe, the painter, dreamer, and independent. At the same time, however, much of Woolf herself comes out in Lily Briscoe. Rather than trying to examine how much of this is Woolf's projection onto the character in compensation for her own perceived shortcomings (this time Lily is the one who cannot bear the thought of having children), we can examine certain aspects of her character that seem indicative of Woolf's personality. In regards to venturing out and seeing some of the great wonders of the artistic world, "Lily Briscoe reflected, perhaps it was better not to see pictures: they only made one hopelessly discontented with one's own work" (TTL 83-4). Woolf herself had a great insecurity when meeting and talking with other authors, as if a rivalry automatically existed between her and them, so that they were in continual competition—or at least in scrutiny of one another.

We also find Lily Briscoe reflecting on Mrs. Ramsay toward the end of the novel, wondering, "what did it mean to her when a wave broke" (TTL 230). More than any other symbol throughout her
works, Woolf uses the waves to capture a variety of thoughts, feelings, fears, hopes, and meanings. To many readers and critics, her view of the waves may always seem melancholic, or must necessarily carry with it some profound statement about time and the relentlessness of the life cycle. In fact, Woolf's treatment of the waves often did reflect these aspects, as did her view of life itself. But the beauty of this symbol is that it can take on so many forms, find itself in various expressions, depending on the state of the character or narrator she has created.

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The diversity of the waves as a symbol is also found in one of her earlier works, Jacob's Room (1922). Here we have a view from the narrator, who observes:

It is curious, lying in a boat, to watch the waves. Here are three coming regularly one after another, all much of a size. Then hurrying after them comes a fourth, very large and menacing; it lifts the boat; on it goes; somehow merges without accomplishing anything; flattens itself out with the rest. (120)

Here the imagery gives an impression of a certain thoughtless conformity with no seeming point to existence. This symbolism may seem characteristic of the novel in its view of life, since Woolf, through the eyes of a young student beginning to reflect
on life's meaning, often turns out phrases such as, "In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows" (72). Similarly, we find the resigned observation of "people passing tragically to destruction" (168). And in the end, Clara reflects that "the suck and sighing of the waves sounded gently, persistently, for ever" (174).

But even within Jacob's Room, the symbol is not strictly limited to this level of profound melancholy. For example, Jacob's friend Bonamy is described simply as "being tossed like a cork on the waves" (164). Similarly, we find Woolf referring to some routine daily activities as "the little waves that life makes; which keep us tossing and going up and down on top of them" (Vol. 3, 165). Because it was such a prevalent symbol, the only certainty is that its perception, its nature, changes along with Woolf and the setting she describes. Often the meaning of the waves extends out into other symbols and takes on an all-encompassing view:

"That was the burden," she mused, "laid on me in the cradle; murmured by waves; breathed by restless elm trees; crooned by singing women; what we must remember: what we would forget."

(BTA 155)

Here the waves have taken on a certain contradiction in that their effect on memory is pulling in two different directions,
both equally powerful. Woolf illustrates this paradoxical nature of the waves even more explicitly in To the Lighthouse, as Mrs. Ramsay reflects on:

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...made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow. (18)

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The significance of the waves as a symbol for Woolf may have contributed to her difficulty in finishing what is often thought of as her most creative work, The Waves, in 1931. Although Woolf tended to become ill towards the end of each of her novels--perhaps at the thought of finishing, or what her friends might say, or what critics might think, or all of these--her struggle with The Waves particularly stands out. Woolf records in her diary, "The Waves is written at such high pressure that I can't take it up and read it through between tea and dinner" (Vol 4,
4). When Woolf was making the final proofs, the comments in her diary include, "I can only read a few pages at a time. So it was when I wrote it, and Heaven knows what virtue it all has, this pressed, ecstatic book," and "The Waves is anyhow tense and packed; since it screws my brain up like this" (Vol 4, 38-40).

Quentin Bell also notes a visit to Charleston late in 1930 that did little good for Woolf's completing The Waves: "She found [Charleston] depressing; the painters teased her, so did Clive; the young reminded her of her age--they seemed to sneer, to mock, and certainly they did not help her to write The Waves" (Bell, Vol II, 156). Nonetheless, amidst the torment of other ideas and concerns (her work Orlando, which was written in between the time she wrote The Waves and To the Lighthouse, was one of these "distractions" the first time she had conceived of the idea for The Waves) Woolf managed in two arduous years to produce one of the most diversely criticized novels of the twentieth century--if one indeed could call it a novel. Woolf notes in her diary in 1930 that, "I am writing The Waves to a rhythm not to a plot" (Vol 3, 316). And in her second draft manuscript, she notes at the top of one page (marked with a large asterisk), "The author would be glad if the following pages were read not as a novel" (Graham 582 verso). Further evidence of this reaction against the conventional novel is noted with Woolf's early conception for The Waves, which also sums up her philosophy of writing as she ventured into modernism:
I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes... Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit any thing to literature that is not poetry--by which I mean saturated? Is that not my grudge against novelists--that they select nothing? (Diary Vol. 3, 210)

It may seem unusual, then, when she writes of *The Waves* in a letter to John Lehmann, "I wanted to eliminate all detail; all fact; and analysis; and myself...and not with poetical, but pure-bred prose..." (Noble 32-33). Although she has described the work as a "very serious, mystical poetical work" early in its conception, her wish for the work not to be "poetical" in her letter stems from another angle on the nature of poetry. Her wish to "saturate" with words in *The Waves* is negated by the "simplicity" characteristic of what she considers poetry, and thus the two seem to contradict one another by approaching from two different directions. This saturation, however, does give *The Waves* a poetical quality (and it is often thought of as a "play-poem") that reaches beyond her notion of the poetical, due to its complexity and the avoidance of any reduction or attempt
to be succinct.

In wanting to "eliminate all detail," it seems that she is contradicting exactly what she is striving for in this work since it builds itself around the detailed lives and thoughts of each character in relation to one another. But for Woolf the definition of "details" in relation to character carries with it a deeper significance than in other literary contexts. Character becomes far more important than plot or setting or perhaps even meaning, since the real meaning lies with the characters. In her influential essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf expresses her primary concern with character through an example of how a certain fictional old lady could be portrayed but is not (due to the author's neglect of her), and we are meant to feel a certain tragic loss because this does not happen:

But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.

(Collected 336)

So although there is certainly an emphasis on details in her writing (and in fact, details seem to be the essential elements in creating this "spirit" of life), they are not the kind of details Woolf was speaking of when she expressed her wish to be rid of them. She cites "Mr. Bennett" (aka Arnold Bennett, the conventional Edwardian author) specifically as one who regularly
incorporates these other, unnecessary, details. In this case, she criticizes his extensive description of Hilda Lessways' view from her bedroom since it has no real relevance, and because in doing so he sacrifices what potentially could be some description of Hilda herself. Woolf notes, somewhat caustically, "One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description" (Collected 329).

Finally, it should be noted that Woolf said she wanted to rid herself completely from the work, in an aim at pure consciousness. Warner speculates that this is why the characters usurp the narration (28). And although Woolf does achieve a sense of purity, it is not written without some significant personal influence--as Warner notes, it is "among the most self-conscious works ever written" (3). Many forces from the outside were working to create The Waves, and we see this in various ways throughout the work:

Life is, soberly and accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child--couldn't step across a puddle once I remember, for thinking, how strange--what am I? etc...All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind. I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book" (Diary Vol. 3, 113)

This diary quote may be the first recorded idea for The Waves, and it can be seen in conjunction with a similar significant
moment in the work itself, with Rhoda's thoughts: "Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard, when holding an envelope in my hand, I carried a message. I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me" (Waves 64).

In a letter to G.L. Dickinson, Woolf writes that "the six characters were supposed to be one" (Warner 74). Some speculation exists as to who or what this "one" might be—her brother Thoby, whose death in 1906 affected her deeply; the Bloomsbury group; or Virginia herself. It seems most likely, however, that all these forces are operating together at least to some degree. If one sees The Waves as a work about the spirit of unification brought about by Percival, whose death brings the six characters together, then the parallel with Thoby's death is appropriate; this same kind of spirit persisted in Woolf's life at that time. Percival is robbed of life through an early death, made even more tragic through the perception of those closest to him. They had seen him as the one who knew what life was about, and who lived life as no one else could. He becomes godlike in the sense that his spirit is ubiquitous, and all the more powerful because all his potential in life was cut short by tragedy. His death left a void that could only be filled by their remembrance, and manifested itself in the bond that he created among them.

For Virginia, her brother's death evoked these same kinds of
feelings. She had seen many possibilities for her brother, whom she saw as a bright and unique young man. Bell notes that in a manuscript written at the end of her life, she wonders what Thoby might have become:

She begins to draw the picture of a successful Stephen, typical of his country and class and then, almost correcting herself, she decides that he was not that: there was something melancholy and original about him, the ordinary ambitions of life would not have mattered much to him (Vol. 1, 112)

Some motivation to revive Thoby's spirit also seems evident from her diary around the time she first began writing *The Waves*. Upon meeting with Clive Bell (one of Thoby's Cambridge friends whom Vanessa decided to marry two days after Thoby died), Virginia writes:

I always feel, how jolly, how much hunting, and talking and carousing there is in you! How long we have known each other--and then Thoby's form looms behind--that queer ghost. I think of death sometimes as the end of an excursion which I went on when he died...And yet I am not familiar with him now, perhaps. Those letters [of Thoby's] Clive read made him strange and external. (Vol. 3, 275)

Perhaps this kind of disconnection moved Woolf to create an untimely picture of this figure, her brother. Whatever this
vague feeling or spirit was, it was with her. And she notes upon reflection of her own solitude (in the same diary entry in which she first conceives of an idea for The Waves), "how it is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with" (Vol. 3, 113). This "something in the universe" seems to be the driving impetus behind the creation of The Waves.

Thoby's influence is also seen if one views The Waves as a tribute to the Bloomsbury group. In a sense, he began what became known as that elite intellectual gathering, the Bloomsbury Group. It included a number of Thoby's friends from Cambridge—a group which Woolf held some grudge against, since they were men who were granted the proper education she desired but was denied. Duncan Grant, one of the select few, notes that Woolf's initial reaction to this group of friends seemed less than positive: "I think there was always something a little aloof and even a little fierce in her manner to most men at the time I am speaking of" (Noble 20). Perhaps her most influential feminist essay, "A Room of One's Own," reflects this reaction most clearly, since it speaks out against the kind of gender discrimination she felt so acutely.

And yet the group came to have a powerful effect on her, as she warmed to the members and the environment that was created. In "Old Bloomsbury" she describes the entrance of Saxon Sydney-Turner, Clive Bell, and Lytton Strachey at one of their gatherings, and hints at the ensuing intellectual debate:
They came in hesitantly, self-effacingly, and folded themselves up quietly into the corners of sofas. For a long time they said nothing. None of our old conversational openings seemed to do... Then at last Vanessa... incautiously used the word 'beauty.' At that, one of the young men would lift his head slowly and say, 'It depends what you mean by beauty.' At once all our ears were pricked. It was if the bull had at last been turned into the ring. (MOB 189)

The purpose of Bloomsbury parties, according to Bell, was "to exchange ideas," and Virginia and Vanessa were happy to make use of their brains rather than their social charm (Vol. 1, 99). Her wish for a "room" in "A Room of One's Own" seems in many ways a wish to have had the environment surrounding the room rather than the room itself. Her relatively limited time with these intellectuals must have been strongly realized, especially upon the reflection of being denied their education—she could not simply call on Lytton Strachey down the hall whenever she had a brilliant idea to share, as could any man at Oxbridge. Rather, she had to stay in her father's library and interpret Shakespeare as best she could on her own.

Bloomsbury's credo, inspired by G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1906) and summarized here by Warner, declares that "the most valuable things in life are certain states of consciousness among which are the perception of beautiful objects and personal
relations" (12). The influence of these values are apparent throughout her literary work, considering their aesthetic quality, and based primarily on the thoughts and interactions of her characters. But Bloomsbury's most significant impact on The Waves stems from the dissolution of the group for a period of time when Woolf was just embarking on her literary career. Quentin Bell explains, "As a result of Thoby's death Bloomsbury was refounded upon the solid base of deep mutual understanding..." (Vol. 1, 113). Thus, there is a parallel between Thoby's death and Percival's death not only as individuals, but through their ability to unite and reunite the group that each had held together.

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Whatever criticism or analysis one can purport, there is always some sense of the unknown, or even mystery, behind the meaning of her works, running parallel to the enigma of the author herself. In regards to her sensitivity of criticism, there is a variety of evidence to support both opposite contentions. Bell states that "Virginia was always enormously sensitive to criticism," citing an early example of this when at the mere age of nine, Virginia would wait in nervous anticipation for her parents' approval as they picked up the Hyde Park Gate News (a newspaper Virginia and her siblings put together to record the Stephen family events). Many others would hold this contention as well, and it certainly seems to be evident with her
recurrent illnesses and consistent apprehension when it was time to give a book to the publisher. Yet at the same time, we cannot discount the words of the author herself, who early in 1915 (the same year her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published after a six-year struggle) writes: "My writing now delights me solely because I love writing and don't, honestly, care a hang what anyone else says" (*Diary* Vol. 1, 20). Many years later and even more poignantly in "Am I a Snob?" she writes:

Now though very vain...my vanity as a writer is purely snobbish. I expose a large surface of skin to the reviewer but very little flesh and blood. That is, I mind good reviews and bad reviews only because my friends think I mind them. (*MOB* 211)

Of course, how much of Virginia's words are truth or not is always subject to question as well, even when writing about herself. Her talent for writing often took the form of a creative kind of inspiration she received from an initial impression of someone, and that she simply let loose through her pen in whichever direction it would take. As Clive Bell recollected, "To one's surprise, often to one's dismay, one found oneself the embodiment of a preconceived idea" (*Noble* 70). Or as Clive's son Quentin says:

...her imagination was furnished with an accelerator and no brakes; it flew rapidly ahead, parting company with reality, and when reality happened to
be a human being, the result could be appalling for the person who found himself expected to live up to the character that Virginia had invented. (Vol. 1, 148).

And although this gave Woolf a certain charisma that those who were closest to her grew to love, there were others who could not quite find the charm behind what could sometimes be caustic remarks [such as the time Frances Marshall recalls at a party when Virginia turns to Desmond MacCarthy's wife and says: 'Molly you are dull. DULL, Molly, you are DULL, aren't you?' (Noble 77)].

At the same time, we cannot entirely count on her diary for statements of complete accuracy, or at least not relative to her personality as a whole. Often she turned to her diary in times she could not read or do anything else because of nerves (Bell, Vol 2, 45). Thus the prevalent negativity or depressive writing that is found throughout her diary does not necessarily mean that Woolf reflected these states in equal proportions. As one of those closest to her, Clive Bell says, "she was about the gayest human being I have known and one of the most lovable" (Noble 71). Many of her friends, and certainly Leonard and Vanessa, also felt this way towards Virginia. And yet they were more aware of the depressive, melancholic side as well.

Leonard was often seen as a "dragon" because he had to keep people away, or prevent Virginia from leaving the house, for the
sake of her health (Bell, Vol. 2, 34). He had to live in constant care of her in many ways from the beginning of their marriage, soon after which she had made another suicide attempt. She was often bedridden from her illness, and often broke down both mentally and physically. Leonard made it his responsibility to care for her with the greatest supervision, which has often been viewed as extreme by both critics and her friends. But those who understood the situation knew that Leonard was acting out of concern. Alix Strachey comments:

Whenever I saw Leonard and Virginia together I noticed how marvelous he was with her. He completely arranged his life and hers so that she would have the minimum of mental strain.

...he could be rather severe at times. Not with Virginia, of course...he always let her do or say anything she liked as long as he thought it would not damage her peace of mind. (Noble 114)

Sometimes Virginia herself would complain at those times (namely, when she was feeling ill again, or had not fully recovered) when he would not allow her to do anything—her interpretation that the world she was missing out on was fun, in contrast to his interpretation that it was too hectic and stressful for her. But almost always she would conclude in retrospect that Leonard had made the most sensible decisions, even in the smallest matters; and she was aware of her own inabilities to cope with reality at
times. As Bell notes, her unstable times must have been all the more tormenting to her since she was sane enough to recognize her insanity (Vol. 2, 15)

So it seems reasonable that Leonard would become frantic with worry if she left the house alone to go for a walk. As Virginia and Leonard's cook, Louie Mayer, notes, "I have seen her bump into trees while she walked, not really knowing what she was doing" (Noble 159). And it was this kind of solitary walk that Virginia took at the last, when she drowned herself in the River Ouse. The final testimony to their relationship can be found in Virginia's last words, addressed solely to Leonard, "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been" (Bell, Vol. 2, 226).

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Our picture of Virginia Woolf concludes with a final glance at the enigma of one who could write both "I like drinking champagne and getting wildly excited," and "What a born melancholic I am," with equal truth (Bell Vol. 2, 146). These extremes of emotions, this ability to feel so powerfully in different directions, the struggle to come to terms with life and death while still being silently consumed by it--these all are the elements of paradox that manage to resolve in harmony through the complex nature of Virginia Woolf. The diversity in her own character enables her to have so many views, so many angles, that all connect up in the unity that pervades her works; brought
about by more than just a writing style, more than any literary
device; but from the complexity of the individual who could
express these feelings and make them accessible to us, the
audience, who might bring the words to life—as she writes in her
final novel, Between the Acts, "thank the actors, not the
author...or ourselves, the audience" (203).

Saxon Sydney-Turner once asked if it "savoured of paradox"
if he believed that Virginia was incredibly charming (Bell Vol. 1, 139). What he found was that complex harmony of character
that made Virginia Woolf more than just a feminist, more than
just a tragedy, more than just a friend; but a genius.
Works Cited


