

# **VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE POETRY OF FICTION**

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Stella McNichol

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Volume 4

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POETRY OF FICTION

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STELLA MCNICHOL

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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What I have written about Virginia Woolf's fiction in the following pages is derived from my reading of the fiction itself and of Virginia Woolf's non-fictional writings, in particular her diaries. I am aware of what has been written on her life, her career as a writer, and her fiction, and from such studies I have derived much stimulation. My own approach to Virginia Woolf's fiction, however, does not depend on any of them in such a particular way as to require footnote acknowledgement, nor have I thought it desirable to interrupt the attention of readers by directing them to topics outside the immediate scope of my study.

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## A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

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With the exception of *Night and Day* (Duckworth), all references to the text of Virginia Woolf's novels are to the Hogarth Press Uniform Edition. The novel under discussion in each chapter is referred to by page number only, and other works by abbreviated titles.

The following abbreviations have been used:

VO	<i>The Voyage Out</i>
ND	<i>Night and Day</i>
JR	<i>Jacob's Room</i>
MD	<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>
TL	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
W	<i>The Waves</i>
Y	<i>The Years</i>
BA	<i>Between the Acts</i>
AROO	<i>A Room of One's Own</i>
AWD	<i>A Writer's Diary</i>
CE I-IV	<i>Collected Essays</i>
CR	<i>The Common Reader</i>
MB	<i>Moments of Being</i>
Bell I, II	Quentin Bell, <i>Virginia Woolf: a Biography</i>

Full details of these works are given in the bibliography.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Oscar Wilde's brilliant, if unfair, epigram at Browning's expense – 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose' – was a criticism both of the content and of the form of his poetry. To claim that Virginia Woolf is a poet who used prose fiction as her medium – the argument of the present study – is likewise to assert something both about the content and about the form of her novels. Often she has the cadences, sometimes even the rhymes, associated with lyric poetry:

So on a summer's day  
the waves collect, overbalance, and fall;  
collect and fall;...

...  
that is all.

(*MD*: 44–5)

Taking the term poetry in a more general sense, it can be shown that the imagery and the structure of her novels arise from a creative imagination that is profoundly poetic in nature. This is not, therefore, a stylistic study of the fiction of Virginia Woolf; or one which focuses narrowly on the lyric qualities of her writing. It does, however, focus on a specific poetic quality or aspect in each novel under discussion as a starting point for interpretation.

The first two chapters of this study indicate some of the ways in which poetic features intrude into the text of what is generally described as a traditional novel. In the case of *The Voyage Out*, for instance, occurrences and events as mundane as a dance and a picnic, ordinary episodes in the chronological

## INTRODUCTION

sequence of events, take on a symbolic dimension which adds a further layer of meaning to that conveyed by the naturally unfolding plot. In *Night and Day* there is a move into fantasy as the central characters embark on a quest which takes them into a world of psychological confusion in which they learn to distinguish between dream and reality. The poetic aspect of this novel inheres mainly in its Shakespearean parallels. *Jacob's Room* is more experimental than the two novels that preceded it. It is Virginia Woolf's most theoretical work, yet even here meaning is conveyed poetically. First there is the dual movement of the novel whereby the optimistic thrust of the central character is undermined by the elegiac voice of the narrator, and second there is the way in which poetic connections are made between the episodes as images and motifs become interwoven into the fabric of meaning. These three novels contain writing of considerable sophistication and maturity.

The major fiction is approached in a more narrowly specific way: *Mrs. Dalloway* through its poetic rhythms, *To the Lighthouse* as a multi-perspectival exploration of a reality embodied in a single image, and *The Waves* as a playpoem. A new kind of poetry is to be found in the last novel.

The aspects of the poetic that constitute the different approaches to each novel in this study indicate something of the way in which Virginia Woolf altered her method as she developed from novel to novel, her method being dictated by different preoccupations.

The first novels are all about young people growing up in Edwardian England. The third of these moves further forward in time: Jacob Flanders dies in the Great War at the age of twenty-six. The second phase is that of the psychological novel. Virginia Woolf's most truly psychological novel is *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is significant that her Modernist manifesto, the essay 'Modern Fiction', was published in the same year. In this essay she expresses her commitment to an inward-looking fiction, recognizes the potential of the stream of consciousness technique (though she does not use that term), and sees that it is necessary to invent new narrative structures to reflect new insights into life. In her progression from *Mrs. Dalloway* to *The Waves* the emphasis of her concern shifts from the psychological to the mystical, the titles of the books reflecting that develop-

## INTRODUCTION

ment: having explored and expressed psychological reality she moves beyond the human to the universal and cosmic reality that she from time to time glimpses as 'a fin in the waste of waters'. The novels of this period reflect the mood of England in the 1920s. The central characters are now middle-aged.

Virginia Woolf wrote two novels of the 1930s, *The Years*, a novel of realism, and the poetic novel *Between the Acts*. They reflect the mood of England in the decade that saw the Depression and the rise of Fascism, and that concluded with the outbreak of war. The bias of her late work is social and historical, and the central characters are elderly. Having plumbed the depths of the human psyche and explored the capacity of the individual to transcend time and the routine dailiness of life, Virginia Woolf turns outwards in her late fiction to consider his situation and significance in the continuum of history. *Between the Acts* has a time span (if one includes the pageant) of 500 years. The focus of this novel is on our consciousness of history whereby the self and history are interlocked in an evolving system. The self of the present assumes the past.

The aim of this study, as the above suggests, is to move away from the general view of Virginia Woolf as a psychological novelist. All such considerations focus on the novels of her central period whereby the early novels are viewed dismissively as apprenticeship works, and those she wrote after *The Waves* as novels of decline. This view fails to do justice to her overall achievement as a novelist. In focusing on the poetic rather than the psychological features of her fiction it is possible in some measure to do justice to its greater range and variety.





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## SYMBOLIC INTRUSIONS IN *THE VOYAGE OUT*

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*The Voyage Out*, written between 1907 and 1913 and published in 1915, reflects the mood and spirit of the Edwardian period. Through its central story the theme of love and marriage is explored, and through, in particular, the emergence of a young woman from the confines of a restrictive Victorian household into a freer world of the 'New Woman', the theme of the changing social role of women is opened up.

This first novel by a writer of sophisticated 'Modernist' fiction is a traditional novel and a *bildungsroman*, and as such it has been too readily dismissed by critics for not being innovative. Yet it is only its surface that makes it a novel of realism, and only at the surface of the book that the genre of the *bildungsroman* is truly applicable. *The Voyage Out* is a novel of surface simplicity, and of submerged complexity. Central to the surface realism of the traditional novel, and of the *bildungsroman* in particular, is the story of Rachel Vinrace who develops out of immaturity and ignorance into womanhood through a series of encounters and events. These chiefly consist of a sea journey and a river journey, social events (the picnic and the dance in particular), sexual awakening, and falling in love and engagement to be married, all of which form the novel's linear structure. Within that structure the theme of love and marriage is examined in a widening social context. A strong sense of social change and disruption is built into the narrative, and the period, the Edwardian era, is specified by the particularity of the novel's documentation.

The development of Rachel Vinrace is central to all levels of *The Voyage Out's* structure. Virginia Woolf explores Rachel's feelings, traces the development of her mind, and above all

charts the fluctuations of her awakening consciousness. She traces her psychological development through the events which shape the course of her life and in which relationships develop, and these events are balanced by instances of solitary reflection and introspection. It is particularly by the fusion of the deeper symbolic structure of the novel into the natural sequence of events dictated by the plot structure that Virginia Woolf achieves a narrative of distinction. The events, because they are infused with the imaginative force of poetry, take on a mythic quality, and they linger in the mind.

The first of the significant events to take place is the picnic on Monte Rosa organized by Terence Hewet. Rachel's invitation to join the party is brought to her by her aunt who interrupts a moment of introspection. That moment is one in which the author analyses the way in which Rachel learns about life vicariously through what she reads, then, more significantly, examines the kind of mental processes that underlie the simple act of taking up a book, reading it for a while, and then discarding it. Helen had promised her a room of her own 'cut off from the rest of the house, large and private ... a fortress as well as a sanctuary'. Within her 'fortress' Rachel had been reading Ibsen (after that it was Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*: she chooses to read 'modern books').

Rachel's experience of reading the play goes through different stages. First she becomes the heroine (Nora in *A Doll's House*) and lives the part for several days. Next comes the stage of personal enrichment from the experience. The author conveys Rachel's direct experience of imaginative life in reading by describing the way in which she responds to her surroundings: as she puts her book down,

[t]he landscape outside, because she had seen nothing but print for the space of two hours, now appeared amazingly solid and clear, but although there were men on the hill washing the trunks of olive trees with a white liquid, for the moment she herself was the most vivid thing in it – an heroic statue in the middle of the foreground, dominating the view. Ibsen's plays always left her in that condition.

(143)

The extraordinary nature of the experience, the heightening of the human consciousness, is presented in visual terms in the image of the 'heroic statue'. When the transition from the imaginative world to the real world has been completed, Rachel attains the third level of mentally questioning the significance of what she has read.

She finds *Diana of the Crossways* less satisfactory. After putting the book aside, she sits immobile in a distracted state of mind. Here Virginia Woolf builds into a passage of ordinary narration an account of the existential experience of self-awareness. After the effort of concentration required by her reading, Rachel lets her mind relax. She gradually begins to take note of sounds around her; they form themselves into a regular rhythm. As that rhythm begins to assert itself in her consciousness, she senses the strangeness of life, but in a detached way: 'It was all very real, very big, very impersonal...' (144). In order to bring herself back to a sense of her own personality she goes through various self-conscious actions in which she looks upon herself, or at aspects of her self, as something separate from herself and so observable in an objective manner:

after a moment or two she began to raise her first finger and let it fall on the arm of her chair so as to bring back to herself some consciousness of her own existence.

(144)

Once she is 'self-possessed' again, she notes through reference to ordinary objects around her the extraordinary nature of her own human existence, and then in and through that the nature of existence itself. This transcendent experience takes over her consciousness again: this is indicated by her sense of being on a plane of existence outside or beyond her body ('She could not raise her finger any more.... She forgot that she had any fingers to raise' (145)).

Rachel's experience of being suspended in time, in existence, on two different planes at once is conveyed unobtrusively within the simple surface narration of what is happening to her:

The things that existed were so immense and so desolate.... She continued to be conscious of these vast