

# SQUARING THE SELF: FORM AND CHARACTER IN VIRGINIA WOOLF

by

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(Under the Direction of Aidan Wasley)

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores Woolf's obsessive pursuit of character by examining Woolf's fixation on frames in the novels she wrote between 1925 and 1928. These novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Orlando* (1928), present characters trapped in unconventional frames, such as window panes, paintings, and door frames. The continual use of frames in these novels suggests that Woolf struggled with the potential impossibility of depicting a self beyond a framed image of that self. Woolf's use of frames suggests instead of reading Woolf as the writer of interior spaces, she is actually a writer of exterior surface, perpetually trying, but failing to escape the material and artificial to capture "the thing itself." This reading places Woolf in a different frame and suggests she was a writer who perpetually tried to write herself out of her own frame through her experimentations with character, obsessive journaling, and attempts at biography.

INDEX WORDS: Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, Character, Frame, Window

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Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay  
Posing in this place. It must move  
As little as possible. This is what the portrait says.  
But there is in that gaze a combination  
Of tenderness, amusement, regret, so powerful  
In its restraint that once cannot look for long.  
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,  
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,  
Has no secret, is small, and it fits  
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.  
That is the tune but there are no words.  
The words are only speculation  
(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):  
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.  
We see only postures of the dream,  
Riders of the motion that swings the face  
Into view under evening skies, with no  
False disarray as proof of authenticity.  
But it is life englobed.  
One would like to stick one's hand  
Out of the globe, but its dimension,  
What carries it, will not allow it.  
No doubt it is this not the reflex  
To hide something, which makes the hand loom large  
As it retreats slightly...

--Excerpt from John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1972)

## CHAPTER1: Introduction

Woolf confesses an obsessive pursuit of a vivid, yet elusive, presence of character in a paper she delivered to the Cambridge Heretics Society on May 18, 1924. She admits: “when I ask myself ...what demon whispered in my ear and urged me to [write] a little figure always comes before me; the figure of a man, or of a woman, who says My name is Brown Catch me if you can” (502). In earlier drafts of this paper (which would later become her essay “Character in Fiction”) Woolf replaced “figure” with “picture.” This revision signals Woolf’s difficulty in defining even a description of the elusiveness of character. With this revision, Woolf makes character more an issue of background and frame than body and actions. She focuses on seeing rather than being, but still leaves the exact value of character unquantified. Woolf’s inability to discover the exact meaning of character leaves character to be defined more by its process than its product. Instead of defining character as a distinct and objective aspect of the novel, Woolf’s experimentations offer a less crisp definition. Character, to Woolf, seems to be simply a writer’s *effort* to represent a self in a text.

Woolf maps this effort to represent a self through framing in the sequence of novels that immediately followed the 1924 lecture: *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Orlando* (1928). In each of these novels, Woolf fixates on the idea of frames to underscore the difficulty in representing a self in a text. Her use of unconventional frames, such as windows, mirrors, and paintings, illuminates the inescapably two-dimensional quality of fictional character and the difficulty of representing a self outside of a frame, whether the frame is cultural, sexual, or literal. In *The Sister’s Arts*, Diane Filby Gillespie argues that framed images of characters in Woolf

novels serve two possible purposes: “Framed images of people can ruthlessly expose the vacuum at the center of an individual’s life....or, on the other hand, they can reveal depths and inner riches not usually perceptible” (217). Woolf’s use of frames seems to fall somewhere in between Gillespie’s two proposed roles. In each of these novels, the framed images of people seem to be attempts by Woolf to illuminate the troubling duality of the function of frames.

For Woolf, character embodied not the challenge of creating people the reader would know (a challenge that motivated writers of the Victorian period to describe their characters down to every button-hole), but instead the deep-seated, foundational doubt of the *existence* of a self to even represent. Woolf questioned the very possibility of novelistic character. It is in the context of this doubt that her repeated use of frames is most interesting: though frames outline their object, they also draw attention to the object’s lack of three-dimensional value. The frame defines the existence of what it frames to a certain pose and background, making existence strictly a function of the frame.

...

The preoccupation with character of Woolf’s contemporaneous critics (Desmond MacCarthy, Q. D. Leavis, and Arnold Bennett, to name a few) provides a useful context for appreciating Woolf’s almost defiant experimentations with character. In her well-known and frequently cited essay on character in the modern novel, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf argues that it is the modern novelist’s artistic challenge to gather the fragments of the Victorian period and reconstruct character in the novel in order to “bring back character from the shapelessness into which it has lapsed, to sharpen its edges,



deepen its compass” (387). On June 19, 1923, Woolf’s entry outlines her experimentation with character: “People like Arnold Bennett, say I can’t create or didn’t in [Jacob’s Room], characters that survive. My answer is—but I leave that to the Nation...I insubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness” (56). In her writing, Woolf attempts to recover the substance of character. Her entry suggests she doubts the existence of substantiated character in reality and hopes, by insubstantizing her characters, that “the Nation” will complete their value. This purposeful insubstantiation implies Woolf understood the impossibility of creating round characters. She follows her own mandate to the younger generations and rescues character from shapelessness by pushing the pendulum far to the other side, making character reside in easily recognizable edges, such as frames, but she is unable to “deepen its compass” (387).

In his most extensive piece of criticism on Woolf, a review of *Orlando* in the October 14, 1928 edition of the *Sunday Times*, Desmond MacCarthy lays out the difficulty of defining character that plagued writers, readers, and critics of the Modernist period. While stating “the novels which have meant most to us...are those which contain characters who have become as familiar to us...[as] people we have known ourselves,” MacCarthy also points to the problem of the inescapable shallowness of character: “Character, is after all, a surface pattern; penetrate below it and it is lost; moreover, this deeper psychology is really just as much a literary convention as character drawing. It was in creation of memorable and individual characters that [Woolf’s] work as a novelist seem[s] weakest” (224). MacCarthy touches on the two contradictions that form the crux of the modern problem with character: we want art to mimic life, but art is inherently

artificial. In laying out what he believes to be Woolf's weakness in respect to character, MacCarthy inadvertently underscores Woolf's intended project with character in her novels: she purposefully fails to create memorable individual characters to point to the absurdity of trying. Instead, Woolf gives us characters that make opaque the "surface pattern," and forces those who go to novels for validation of a multi-dimensional human condition to close their book empty-handed.

In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, published in 1932, critic Q.D. Leavis meditates on the same trend in popular responses to character in fiction MacCarthy touches on in his review. She laments the trend MacCarthy's realization signifies and advocates a detour from the popular responses to character construction in novels. She typifies the popular response: "Your characters *live*. They become friends." She argues "this kind of interest leads critics to compare the merits of novelists by the size of the portrait gallery each has given the world" (59). Woolf's interest in character construction in the novels I am discussing seems to subtly play on this notion of a "portrait gallery." More than thirty years after Leavis, W. J. Harvey, in his book, *Character and the Novel* (1965), offers his own reading of character in the novel and responds to Leavis's statement by asking: "Isn't the term 'portrait gallery' far too static to square with our sense of chance, process, development in fictional characters?" (207)

While her term "portrait gallery" may be too static for Harvey's reading of character in the novel, Leavis zeroes in on the problem of reading character in Woolf as anything else than what it is—a representation on a single-dimensional page, and like the page, thin and flat. Harvey, on the other hand, goes as far as to suggest that characters in Woolf must be addressed in terms of "conception, gestation, birth and growth," which are

terms that simply do not apply to Woolf (31). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* we find characters *do not* grow, but, in fact, seem to be continually reinvented and reframed, a process that highlights their static and flat nature. Through her experiments with character, Woolf suggests characters do not follow a linear trajectory that can easily be made into a mimetic narrative. Woolf instead offers characters that follow an overtly constructed and fictional path, which must be analyzed in terms of creator, composition, frame, and label. Woolf cuts the ties between novel and reality, and suggests that not only is there no reality in fiction, but no reality beyond the frame in life as well.

...

We find the root of Woolf's questioning of traditional models of fiction in Henry James. Throughout her career, Henry James served as a figure that Virginia Woolf both admired and contradicted. She reminds herself in one of her final diary entries to "mark Henry James's sentence: Observe Perpetually" (*Diary 5*, 357). While Woolf strove to mimic aspects of James's style, her appropriation of Jamesian models suggests some frustration with the frame. Woolf's experimentation with windows as frames derives from ideas James establishes in his 1908 preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million---a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of

them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft, they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. (7)

Woolf's appropriation of the window in the "house of fiction" updates the model and calls attention to the "figure with a pair of eyes" standing at each window by framing character as such. Each and every major character in the three novels I have chosen to discuss are presented within a frame at least once. This framing questions the possibility of strictly verbal presentations of characters and suggests observation of framed images is all that is possible. Woolf also experiments with positioning her characters both inside and outside of the "house of fiction," highlighting the idea that no one is free from the frame. Her exploration of the creation of character underscores the post-Edwardian dilemma of the Georgians: how are we to suppose to shape a character the reader "knows" by simply looking out of the displaced Jamesian window on to a decisively empty and fragmented modern landscape?

...

Much of Woolf criticism deals with what critics see as Woolf's mapping of a multi-level consciousness. Eric Auerbach's seminal piece of Woolf criticism, which appeared in *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953), provides the foundation for this trend. Auerbach, in his chapter on *To the Lighthouse*, argues:

The essential characteristic of the technique represented by Woolf is that we are given not merely one person whose consciousness (that is, the impressions it receives) is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shifts from one to the other....the multiplicity of persons suggests that we are here after all confronted with an endeavor to investigate an objective reality. (536)

Alex Zwerdling rephrases Auerbach's reading more than thirty years later by stating that Woolf "map[s] the intricate labyrinth of consciousness" (10). Critics seem determined to ground Woolf's method in the psychological because of its shift in focus from the mind of the narrator to the minds of the characters; but while this method may seem to signal a registry of the psychological interior of characters, it actually portends the inescapability of the material exterior. Creating a textual "hall of mirrors," the descriptions of characters' consciousness repeatedly reflect and rely on descriptions of exterior frames. For example, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa projects her own consciousness on "the old lady" framed in her window, seeing herself in "the old lady." The interior consists of exterior frames, troubling the existence of Zwerdling's "labyrinth of consciousness."

In *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest & Question of Itself* (1991), Pamela Caughie seeks alternative explanations of Woolf, questioning assumptions previous critics have made about Woolf texts. Caughie argues that "Woolf does not offer the reader a new type of character...but changes the ways we read character" and suggests that she "foregrounds character by making the narrative perspective opaque, something we look at, not through" (64). Caughie's argument implies that seeing the visible surface value is essential to understanding Woolf's use of character. By continually framing characters in window panes, door frames and mirrors,

Woolf renders the structure of narrative surface “opaque.” Woolf empties characters of any multi-dimensional value and emphasizes the museum-like preservation and depiction of character in the modern novel. In framing characters, Woolf not only forces us to “look at” narrative perspective, but to “look at” characters, instead of reading them into being. As Rachel Bowlby suggests in her book, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (1997), Woolf’s revision of her contemporaneous critics’ notion of the value of character in the novel is “not so much [an issue] of ebbs and flows in the vitality of artistic conventions. Rather, it involves a completely new representation of social and subjective experience” (7).

A recent trend in character analysis has been to analyze character in Woolf novels in terms of “theatrical properties,” as Adam Parkes puts it in “Lesbianism, History, and Censorship: *The Well of Loneliness* and the Suppressed Randiness of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*” (1994). Parkes argues: “Woolf exploits the theatrical properties of sexual identity to create a whole world of performance that renders the rhetoric of sincerity ever more doubtful” (435). While Parkes’s reading deals solely with *Orlando*, his argument calls attention to a crucial aspect of Woolf’s use of character in all her novels. In her exploitation of the unstable, Woolf, as Parkes points out, questions the possibility of character in the novel beyond a “world of performance.” Performative theories provide a different lens through which to view Woolf’s project with character, but still allow character some multi-dimensional existence, even if it is just performative. Significantly, in the novels I have chosen to discuss, characters *do* little to further the plot; when character interaction arises, it is the result of one character observing another from afar or through a window, suggesting distance even in moments of interaction. The inaction of

characters suggests the role of character in Woolf novels is actually anti-performative in nature and implies characters occupy a strictly material presence. Woolf's frequent use of the window underscores the importance of seeing in the novel and makes character an issue of observing rather than performing.

...

By framing characters in two dimensions, Woolf transforms the novel to a text that must be read visually, not linearly. Since there is little real action or progression in the characters' lives, only shifts of frames, a narrative's traditional trajectory (beginning, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement) becomes obsolete. With this re-envisioning of the novel, Woolf calls attention to the conventions that frame literature. This flattening of character and the novel troubles previous notions of art's relation to life, and questions the possibility of realism. Raymond Williams's definition of "realism" in *Keywords* makes clear the difficulty of defining what is real: "Realist art or literature is seen as simply one convention among others, a set of formal representations, in a particular medium to which we have become accustomed. The object is not really lifelike but by convention and repetition has been made to appear so" (261). Woolf's focus on both visual and verbal representations underscores the convention of character and troubles the notion of verisimilitude in the novel, suggesting a type of anti-realism. With the power of frames in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*, Woolf conflates appearance and reality, seeing and being, the individual and collective, presence and absence, the historical and fictional, as a way of questioning the existence of anything outside of a frame.

Woolf's persistent reframing of character in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* scrutinizes the assumption of an existence of a stable self. *Mrs. Dalloway* lays the groundwork for this exploration of the value of character by presenting two characters who invest in the visual as a sign of a self, and one character, Septimus Smith, who sees the disjunction between the two. Septimus denies the frame any value and shatters it finally with his suicide. While *Mrs. Dalloway* signals the need for a redefinition of character, *To the Lighthouse* grapples with the narrative repercussions of this disillusionment. For example: If characters are inseparable from the frames that define them, is there a Mrs. Ramsay? We would like to believe that there is, but Woolf's perpetual framing troubles an affirmative response to this question. *Orlando* denies the possibility of character and seems to satirize the previous novels' efforts of suggesting a self can be represented. Orlando is the embodiment of seeing a self through multiple and various frames. Toward the end of the novel, she "needs another self" and calls upon her many selves, claiming: "these selves of which we are built upon, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will...so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains...another when Mrs. Jones is not there, another if you can promise it a glass of wine" (308). Orlando's meditation on her separate selves implies that there is not *one*, fully developed Orlando, but instead a series of character frames that fill in for each occasion, making Orlando's character more of backdrop for various set changes than a representation of a single self. Each novel closes with lines that remind the reader to examine the representation of characters. While the final lines of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* ("For there she was"/ "I have had my



vision”) seemingly suggest a type of transcendent solution to the problem of character; they are actually seem to suggest the novel’s failure to depict a character outside of a certain frame. With these final lines, Woolf forces the reader to realize that he or she has *no* idea who Clarissa Dalloway *is* and *no* idea what Lily’s vision even looks like. The novels close giving us a final frame without a final image. *Orlando* ends in complete abstraction (“It is the goose!...The wild goose”), implying a subtle satire of the two preceding novels’ posturing of progress.

...

It is time to place Woolf in a different frame. Instead of seeing her as the female “bard of interiority” and mental drama, Woolf is a writer whose work exploits the impossibility of getting beyond the frame. What is perhaps most remarkable, however, is that Woolf understood the potential futility of her project before she ever began to write her three most well-known novels. Her understanding of this futility can be traced back to *Jacob’s Room* (1922), in which she expresses the resigning thought that “it is no use trying to sum people up” (37). This self-consciousness torments and guides Woolf as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*. Woolf’s use of frames in these novels is simultaneously an acknowledgment of the futility of her act and an effort to achieve it.

## CHAPTER 2: “Behind a Pane of Glass”: The Role of Windows and Mirrors in Framing Character

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf positions the three main characters, Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Smith, in separate frames, allowing each character to occupy the space of individual narratives. While the frames rarely intersect, any interaction between the characters results from a character framing another. For example, Septimus enters Clarissa’s narrative not as a multi-dimensional self, but a “young man who had killed himself” (363). Both Clarissa and Walsh conflate self and appearances of self. Clarissa sees the definition of her self in the reflection of her mirror: “That was her self—pointed, dartlike; definite” (226). Walsh can only see himself through the ready-made frame of cultural clichés such as the “romantic buccaneer” (246). Septimus, on the other hand, sees that selves are only superficially seen and not understood or known. His character provides a counterexample to Clarissa and Walsh. As a result of his disillusionment, Septimus jumps out of the window, shattering the device used to frame characters throughout the novel and providing a rather bleak and ironic summary of the book’s conclusion about the possibility of selves knowing themselves or others beyond the limited frame subjectivity allows. In framing her characters to represent different sides of the same issue, *Mrs. Dalloway* dramatizes the need for a reevaluation of character, after the disillusionment of World War One, and signals the beginning of Woolf’s experiments with frames.

...

From the beginning of the novel, Clarissa Dalloway occupies the space of observer and observed. We are first introduced to Clarissa while she is on her way to buy flowers for her party, which immediately frames her as the expectant hostess. While becoming part of the crowd on the street, Clarissa describes feeling that she is outside of it and “looking on,” which establishes her as character that occupies almost the liminal space between frame and image: “She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone” (200). While having the sense of being disconnected from the present moment, Clarissa is also grounded in the visual impressions the morning scene offers: “what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her, the fat lady in the cab” (200). It is a rather banal image that grounds Clarissa in the moment. By making this image surprisingly pedestrian, Woolf establishes Clarissa as a character who invests in *any* kind of visual image. Woolf seems to employ the visual as the means of signaling a kind of secondary, compromised mode of knowledge, as opposed to the idealized fully-rounded knowledge of another’s interior. The novel’s perpetual retreats to the visual signify a resigned acknowledgement that complete identification is finally impossible; all we have is mundane surface and “the fat lady in the cab” (200).

The first description of Clarissa is offered from the perspective of a passer-by: “A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does people live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright” (196). Here, we get what

seems to be the most objective description of Clarissa's character in the novel. We learn she is over fifty and that she has recently been sick. But while we get objective pieces of information, Woolf inserts a subjective and colorful caricature of her appearance, highlighting the subjectivity that comes from placing character description in the eyes of other characters. By presenting Clarissa's appearance and character through the perspective of an insignificant passer-by (who does not even appear again in the novel), Woolf implies character occupies a rather subjective space in the novel—a space dependent on who happens to *see* the character rather than who the character happens to *be*. In constructing Clarissa's character through perspective, not paragraphs of narrated description, Woolf grounds character development in the visual from the beginning of the novel.

Woolf furthers the construction of Clarissa as a character who is able to be both inside and outside at the same time by continually placing her in windows. We first see Clarissa framed in the flower shop window. When the car passes, Clarissa goes to the window and “with her arms full of sweet peas, looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry” (206). While this framed image comes from an anonymous viewer, possibly the narrator, it is important to note that the title character, up to this point in the novel, has been established by a series of framed images. We have little sense of who Clarissa Dalloway is and depend strictly on other characters' visual impressions. Importantly, the framed images we are given form only an outline of her character, leaving the reader to supply any substance. An analysis of the series of framed images in the text reveals that Woolf uses these frames in an effort to objectively present character, while recognizing that representation of character is inherently limited by frame and perspective.

Clarissa Dalloway is hyper-aware of the visual impressions others may have about her. While preparing for her party, Clarissa constructs a framed image of herself in anticipation of the image she will be called on to be that night:

Seeing the glass, the dressing table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself... She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together. (226)

Here, Clarissa “defines” her “self” by seeing a two-dimensional image of it reflected back at her. In having Clarissa point her “self” out for the reader, Woolf creates a moment in the text where a character seems to admit her own non-existence. In having Clarissa frame and pose her own character for the viewing of the reader and other characters, Woolf points out that even self-viewing becomes more about anticipating others’ views than really seeing the self, which makes the interior a function of the exterior, a self dependent on the non existence of one. Clarissa’s exchange with the mirror also questions the possibility of knowledge of self and insinuates that understanding ourselves is achievable only by consuming representations of it.

Through Clarissa’s “relationship” with “the old lady” who lives next door, Woolf further investigates the relationship between identity and appearance. Clarissa sees “the old lady” twice from her window. Woolf has Clarissa watch “the old lady” toward the beginning and end of the novel, which intimates that “the old lady” has not moved throughout the course of the novel. Woolf uses this method frequently in both *To the*

*Lighthouse* and *Orlando* to highlight the stationary poses characters must assume. The first time Clarissa watches “the old lady,” Clarissa is getting ready for the party:

She watched out of the window the old lady opposite climbing upstairs. Let her climb upstairs if she wanted to; let her stop; then let her, as Clarissa had often seen her, gain her bedroom, part her curtains, and disappear again into the background. Somehow one respected that—that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched. (308)

Even in movement, therefore, “the old lady” is framed in her window. Clarissa’s description further highlights the flatness of “the old lady’s” character by describing her disappearing into the “background.” In this novel, character is an issue of background because what one sees when looking at a frame of a character constructs the viewer/reader’s image of that character. For example, if “the old lady” was framed in her kitchen instead of her bedroom, the character would be quite different and have less of a mortal quality. Clarissa also describes Sally Seton in relation to her “background” (225). It is Clarissa’s second encounter with her neighbor that begins to question the existence of “the old lady” outside of Clarissa’s frame of vision:

How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching, to see the old lady (they had been neighbors ever so many years) move away from the window...Clarissa tried to follow her as she turned and disappeared, and could still just see her white cap moving at the back of the bedroom. She was still there moving about at the other end of the room...that’s the miracle, that’s the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from chest of drawers to dressing table. She could still see her. (309)

In moving away from the window, “the old lady” ceases to be Clarissa’s neighbor. By leaving her frame, “the old lady” becomes an imagined narrative rather than a character. While Clarissa can imagine that she is “still there moving about,” her awe of this “miracle” suggests Clarissa’s inability to extract being from seeing. During her party, Clarissa again walks to the window to observe “the old lady”:

Oh, but how surprising!—in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed...She was going to bed in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed. She pulled the blind now...There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on. (363)

Clarissa’s final observation of “the old lady” seems to be readable as an image of character extinction and implies a world full of solitary people looking out of windows at each other, seeing but not understanding, and turning out the lights in defeated resignation about the impossibility of making “the voyage out” and escaping the limitations of one’s little “room.”

While Clarissa asks: “Did she not wish everybody merely to be themselves?” the novel’s perpetual reframing of characters suggests that there really is no “self,” only representations. Clarissa theorizes that “our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us,” but characters, even the main characters, are seen strictly as “apparitions,” momentarily seen in a window frame and then gone, offering no hint of the existence of anything unseen (332).

...

Peter Walsh is also presented through a sequence of frames. Returning to London after spending five years in India, Walsh visits Clarissa and is quickly framed twice in the span of two pages. The first framed image of Walsh is visualized by Clarissa: “Peter Walsh had got up and crossed to the window and stood with his back to her, flicking a bandanna handkerchief from side to side. Masterly and dry and desolate he looked, his thin shoulder blades lifting his coat slightly” (236). While Clarissa and Walsh have been talking up to this point, this is the first description of Walsh’s appearance. Woolf has Walsh walk to the window before we learn how Clarissa sees him, overtly gesturing to the framing function of windows. Soon after Clarissa frames Walsh in the window of her drawing-room, Walsh leaves. While walking down the street, he turns and looks at an image of himself “reflected in the plate-glass window of a motor-car manufacturer in Victoria Street” (237).

Like Clarissa, Walsh only knows who he is by seeing himself framed. When following a girl, Walsh frames an image of himself using the clichéd frame of the “romantic buccaneer”:

There was color in her cheeks; mockery in her eyes; he was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned properties, yellow dressing-gown, pipes, fishing rods, in the shop windows; and respectability and evening parties and spruce old men wearing white slips beneath their waistcoats. He was a buccaneer. (242)



In having Walsh frame himself in a pre-existing (and self-deluding) narrative frame, Woolf reveals Walsh looks at the world through pre-made frames. This scene provides an instance of using a conventional narrative frame to define oneself for oneself. The fact Walsh resorts to insipid frames suggests what is being framed (himself and others) has no inherent and unique value. Walsh continually employs frames incongruent to the image he wishes to capture. While walking, he focuses his eye on the sky and branches of a tree and “endows them with womanhood” and “sees with amazement how grave they become” (245). Much like Lily Briscoe, who remembers “subject, object, and the nature of reality” by envisioning a “scrubbed kitchen table,” Walsh deposits the extremely abstract onto the extremely physical, attesting to the power of frames (23). Walsh’s conflation of the abstract and physical suggests the need for and power of arbitrary frames in understanding a self.

Like Clarissa, Walsh also frames people in windows: “Indoors among ordinary things, the cupboard, the table, the window-sill with its geraniums, suddenly the outline of the land-lady, bending to remove the cloth, becomes soft with light, an adorable emblem which only the recollection of cold human contacts forbids us to embrace” (246). In the frame of the window, the shape of the landlady bending down becomes an “adorable emblem,” which underscores the shallow subjectivity of Walsh’s perspective of the female self. Walsh’s description incorporates compositional terms such as “outline” and “light,” which highlight the constructed quality of the image Walsh sees from the sidewalk. Walsh also remembers characters in framed shots; he remembers Aunt Helena “with her head against the window” and describes his “first view” of Richard Dalloway as Dalloway “[standing] by Miss Parry’s chair as though he had been

cut out of wood” (348, 249). The double-dimensional quality of Walsh’s memories of people suggests that what we see is all we know. To view is not fully to know, but to read the available “cut out” and framed surface.

For Walsh, existence is the framed image. He defines beauty as something you find in a frame:

Windows lit up, a piano, a gramophone sounding; a sense of pleasure-making hidden, but now and again emerging when, through the uncurtained window, the window left open, one saw parties sitting over tables, young people slowly circling, conversations between men and women, maids idly looking out...stockings drying on top of ledges, a parrot, a few plants. (342)

Both Clarissa and Walsh have pleasure in looking in other people’s windows because it allows them the delusion of seeing what is “unseen,” what exists behind the frame. But by giving the scene no specifics and yet again framing the scene with the window neither Walsh nor Woolf allows this scene anything more than a surface value. While Walsh is technically looking behind the frame and into the house, the image offers no depth and instead grants just another image. The shallowness of Walsh’s and Clarissa’s responses to these framed images make them just as superficial as the framed images they watch.

Clarissa’s and Walsh’s pleasure in looking in on the unaware suggests they are voyeuristic (an idea Woolf continues in *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*) and alerts the reader to our own voyeur-like qualities and that, in fact, we are watching them watch others; we are framing them as they are framing others. By pointing us to our own “inner voyeur,” Woolf provides a moment of narrative self-consciousness, where we are forced to see our own shallow framed subjectivity of these fictional characters.

...

We learn that Septimus Smith, like many other young men, volunteers to go to the war to preserve the emblematic status of a framed image; Septimus “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (271). This passage implies Septimus’s England before the war consisted mainly of framed images. Suffering from shell-shock, Septimus is no longer able to invest in the visual and sees that there is nothing behind the frames. While Clarissa and Peter Walsh repeatedly look out and into windows, Septimus refuses to be reintegrated into this system of valuing the visual as representing “the essential thing” (*TTL* 49). Rezia implores Septimus to “take an interest in things outside himself” and repeatedly asks him to follow the collective “eye,” to look and invest meaning into appearances. Septimus, however, sees the disconnect between the two and understands that appearances are not necessarily representative of a larger truth or being. For Septimus, visual impressions are strictly appearances. Looking out of the Jamesian window through which Clarissa and Walsh seem to peer, Septimus is unable to construct a narrative: “looking at England from the train window...the world itself is without meaning” (273). Septimus’s character is the most representative of Woolf’s own struggle with character. Like Septimus, Woolf sees that character construction is inevitably two-dimensional and “behind a pane of glass” (273). As a result, Woolf begins to depict it that way by using windows and mirrors as frames and display cases.

Septimus is the only character who separates the visual from the emotional. Where Clarissa and Walsh would theorize a narrative, Septimus denies the existence of one:

For the truth is...human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, no charity...They are plastered over with grimaces. There was Brewer at the office, with his waxed moustache, coral tie-pin, white slip, and pleasurable emotions—all coldness and clamminess within-- They never saw him drawing pictures of them naked at their antics in his notebooks. (275)

While both Clarissa and Walsh believe there is more “unseen” beneath the “apparitions,” Septimus realizes there is nothing behind the picture. Interestingly, Septimus is the only character who draws pictures of other characters, perhaps because he understands that is the best one can do. Throughout the novel, Clarissa and Walsh draw mental portraits of characters that incorporate background, other objects, and even frame. The fact that Septimus draws them “naked” in his notebooks suggests he sees that what is behind the curtain is nothingness. His suicide suggests this as well, as does Woolf’s. Septimus understands the conflation of appearance and reality as he acts out his character while simultaneously denying that his gestures signify anything: “At last, with a melodramatic gesture which he assumed mechanically and with complete consciousness of its insincerity, he dropped his head on his hands” (275). In having a character that realizes and articulates his own void, Woolf maps her pursuit of “Brown” onto her characters, creating a self-reflexive and self-critical quality to her work.

Significantly, Septimus exits the novel through the “large Bloomsbury-lodging house window,” the device used to frame characters throughout the novel (329). While he has trouble opening the window, the window quickly becomes the way Septimus shatters the frame. With Septimus’s suicide, Woolf suggests there is only non-existence outside the frame. Septimus thinks to himself that this method of suicide is Holmes and

Bradshaw's "idea of tragedy," but it is not his. Perhaps in suggesting that Holmes and Bradshaw "like that sort of thing," Septimus implies that even in a denial of windows' transformative powers, the doctors will still invest meaning in the empty frame, recalling what must have been there before. Holmes and Bradshaw will insist on framing his death as a "tragedy," which, from Septimus's view, is just the final example of people seeing the world through frames, rather than understanding the subjectivity of others. In waiting until the last minute to jump, Septimus provides the reader one last framed image. Ironically, after Septimus's suicide, Rezia is finally able to see Septimus's framed image of "Holmes": "She saw the large outline of his body standing dark against the window. So that Was Dr. Holmes" (331). In transferring this image from Septimus to Rezia, Woolf highlights Rezia's own need to frame what drove Septimus to suicide.

...

The ambiguity of the final lines of the novel displays Woolf's frustration with character. The last lines—"It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was"—leave the reader with no image of Clarissa, and instead further abstract the existence of her character. The final lines make the reader realize that he or she has no idea who Clarissa Dalloway "is." The reader is forced to look back through the novel and take an inventory of the framed images of Clarissa given throughout the novel, but a true sense of character still eludes this inventory. The final lines echo Walsh's vague memory of Clarissa cited earlier in the text. Walsh remembers Clarissa as "she stood, as he had often seen her, in a doorway with lots of people round her. But it was Clarissa one remembered. Not that she was striking; not beautiful at all, there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything specially clever; there she was, however; there she was" (262). While "it was

Clarissa one remembered,” this memory is almost a non-memory, an erasure of Clarissa. Walsh’s memory and the final lines of the novel deny Clarissa any value beyond the image of her standing in the door way, which again points to the impossibility of knowing someone, or creating a character, beyond the frame. Interestingly, Mrs. Dalloway is probably Woolf’s most well-known character even though her character is defined by a non-existence, an empty frame.

In recalling this abstraction of Clarissa Dalloway in the final lines of the novel, Woolf frames *Mrs. Dalloway* as a failure in representing character. Even though the novel fails to capture “Brown,” it narrates the need for a refiguring of character in the juxtaposition of Clarissa and Walsh’s investment in the frame with Septimus’s shattering of it. *Mrs. Dalloway* lays the groundwork for Woolf’s experiments with character in the next two novels with the simultaneous establishment and questioning of traditional literary conventions.

### CHAPTER 3: Unable to See Beyond the Gilt Frame:

#### The Frame is “The Thing Itself”

Woolf continues her inquiry into the possibility of character outside of the frame in *To the Lighthouse*. Perpetually trapping her characters within frames (as in *Mrs. Dalloway*), Woolf asserts the frame as “the thing itself” (116). Woolf examines the various impacts of this predication on narrative structure in the three sections of the novel. Each section reconfigures its own narrative structure to overtly display character’s dependence on the frame. The first section, titled “The Window,” revolves around the framed image of Mrs. Ramsay; the second section highlights character’s dependence on the frame by having its only character repeatedly define herself through her reflection in the mirror; and the final section foregrounds issues of perspective and distance. While ultimately maintaining the premise that the knowledge of self and others is, at best, imaginary, *To the Lighthouse* unsuccessfully attempts to disprove this premise with characters who perpetually try to see beyond their own and others’ limited frames. The equivocal, final lines of the novel encapsulate the novel’s restlessness in its own frame.

...

As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, we are given little description of each character outside of their framed pose in *To the Lighthouse*. For example, we see Mr. Carmichael only through a couple of details such as the fact that he has cat-like “yellow,” “smoky green” eyes and a yellow-streaked beard and moustache (10). From these scant details we gather a few aspects of Mr. Carmichael’s appearance, but little else. Likewise, aside from her age, the only description of Lily is of her “little Chinese eyes” and “white, little puckered

face,” which reduces even the artist figure in the novel to mere facial features (26).

While we are given a few stock portraits of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and Mr. Ramsay, these images represent individual perceptions, not an objective, overall description of character. By constructing characters through strictly superficial details, Woolf thematizes the difficulty of narrative to represent a self other than in flat, inadequate terms.

Diane Filby Gillespie explains Woolf’s omission of details: “Woolf rarely provides lengthy descriptions of her characters’ physical appearances. When she does, usually in her earlier novels she does so through their own eyes, or through the eyes of other characters” (190). The language of Gillespie’s discussion of character is grounded in the visual, implying knowledge beyond the visual is limited by one’s frame of vision. In refusing to provide lengthy descriptions, Woolf makes the reader *see* the characters rather than read them into being, which forces the reader to mimic what the characters do throughout the novel: create whole “imaginative structures” based on what part they *can* see (173).

...

Immediately bringing flattened representations of objects to the foreground of the text, the novel opens with James Ramsay cutting out pictures from an illustrated catalogue. With this scene, layers frame upon frame, establishing character as occupying a tenuous, subjective space from the beginning. Woolf shows the investment of subjective and emotional meaning onto a flat image, which subtly parallels Woolf’s notion of character interaction: “James...endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. It was fringed with joy. The wheelbarrow, the



lawnmower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling—all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind”(3-4). What spurs James to “endow” the images he cuts out of the catalogue with “heavenly bliss” is unclear. While it may be his mother’s voice, Woolf leaves this detail ambiguous. It is clear in this scene, through its language, that the scene perhaps is a model for Woolf’s own efforts to create character. Like James, Woolf tries to enliven inherently two-dimensional representations. The language is notably similar to the language Woolf uses in *Mrs. Dalloway* to describe Walsh as he sees branches of a tree against the sky, “endows them with womanhood,” and “sees with amazement how grave they become” (245). By devoting time in her novels to describe this “endowment” of meaning to an image by both a young boy and middle-aged man, Woolf highlights the transaction between viewer and object that must take place in order for the viewer/reader to gain a meaningful narrative.

Allen McLaurin argues that the opening scene of the novel establishes the role of frames in the text: “James’s cutting out and the act of framing are seen as similar acts of imagination” in that they allow the reader to observe the ability of the child to see beauty in the mundane. McLaurin defines framing as “taking objects out of the stream of everyday ‘practical’ life,” and suggests a positive function of frames throughout the novel. While I am not arguing frames serve a *negative* function in this text, *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Orlando*, in each of the novels frames serve to trouble the possibility of accurate representation rather than express a child-like ability to see art in the everyday. Woolf employs frames (both conventional and unconventional) to remind the reader that he or she is reading a constructed text and that the characters are little more than framed

portraits. The fact that Woolf employs the same language in her description of James as she does in her description of Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway* suggests perhaps that we are not supposed to read the scene as necessarily an act of child-like whimsy, but an inescapable chore of the every day. While James cuts the images from the catalogue at the opening of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay simultaneously attempts to frame an image of James “directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs” (4). In having Mrs. Ramsay frame James while he is, as McLaurin argues, “framing” other images, Woolf layers framed image upon framed image. The fact Mrs. Ramsay is posing for Lily’s frame layers yet another framed image on top of the other two. In this initial layering of frames, Woolf has the first section question the possibility of its own project and frames the novel’s failure to represent character outside of the frame before it begins.

The first section of the novel revolves around Mrs. Ramsay “knitting with her head outlined absurdly by the gilt frame” (30). While the narrative moves back and forth between time periods in what seems to be the foregrounding narrative of the first half of the section, she remains framed for Lily’s portrait. While Mrs. Ramsay is established as the focal point of the novel from its opening pages, descriptions such as this one remind the reader that Mrs. Ramsay is doubly framed. For Lily, she is framed by the window, but she is also framed by the “gilt frame” of the picture that hangs behind her. This double frame serves to further separate Mrs. Ramsay from the scene and further deny the possibility of an existence of self outside the frame. Allen McLaurin suggests the frame functions as a way of “recapturing imaginative power” and that Mrs. Ramsay is “no longer simply Mrs. Ramsay, she is cut off from the practical world and transfigured into something like a painting of the Mother and Child” (195). McLaurin’s reading of frames

suggests there *is* a Mrs. Ramsay beyond her framed portrait. While he sees the frame as simply a means of resurrecting the imagination, I would argue frames serves a less restorative function and instead represent the manufactured quality of what they surround. The framed image of Mrs. Ramsay reappears throughout the text even after Mrs. Ramsay has died. Other characters remain in their frames throughout the course of the novel as well. Lily remains framed as the girl with “little Chinese eyes” and “white, little puckered face” long after Mrs. Ramsay has passed (17). Woolf’s repetition of certain visual framed portraits suggests a less restorative ability of the frames than McLaurin suggests, and instead grounds the narrative in the unimaginative and the counterfeit.

Mrs. Ramsay’s role in the novel seems to be to sit still: “Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—that light, for example” (63). Even in the dinner scene and the garden scenes, Mrs. Ramsay is defined by her framed pose. Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to become “the thing she looked at” suggests Mrs. Ramsay is an empty frame, becoming what she surrounds, but unable to carry any value on her own. The novel revolves around her, offering different framed, subjective views of her from different angles, but no actual description of exists at the center. At the close of the fourth chapter of “The Window,” we are reminded how the novel thus far has revolved around Mrs. Ramsay’s pose. We learn that “the sight of [Lily] standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily’s picture. Lily’s picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled...remembering her promise, she bent her head” (17). At this point in the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is not sitting

quite still enough. Instead of having Lily call to Mrs. Ramsay to remind her to keep her pose, Woolf has Mrs. Ramsay look out of the window and see Lily, which reminds her. “The sight” of Lily standing on the lawn reminds Mrs. Ramsay of her own pose and frame, highlighting the fact that character interaction in this novel is strictly visual and looking out at an other’s frame also causes a reminder of one’s own frame. Mrs. Ramsay’s description of Lily standing on the lawn painting is the novel’s first description of Lily’s appearance. While Mrs. Ramsay is the central framed character in the novel, she is also given the power to frame Lily throughout the novel. Mrs. Ramsay repeatedly describes Lily as the poor girl with the “little Chinese eyes and puckered up face” who will never marry (17). With this reciprocal, yet inadequate, method of framing, Woolf suggests even the artist figure is not exempt from the frame, an idea she will take further in *Orlando*.

While the description of Mrs. Ramsay outlined “absurdly by the gilt frame” offers the most obvious textual evidence of Woolf’s experimentation with frames in the novel, there are many more subtle descriptions that trap Mrs. Ramsay’s character in the frame. She is positioned twice against framed pieces of art in the first thirty pages of the novel. Toward the beginning of the novel, Mr. Tansley remembers her standing “quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter” (14). Mrs. Ramsay is motionless against the picture, revealing no three-dimensional sign that would suggest she is different than the image on the canvas. Tansley’s most vivid memory of Mrs. Ramsay expresses an inherent desire to frame her not only in a certain pose, but with a certain background. This framing suggests background and subject are inseparable and that context and self are connected since the

way one reads a character depends crucially upon what else you see when you look through the frame. Mrs. Ramsay is also described within the same frame as an “authenticated masterpiece by Michael Angelo” later in the novel (30). By continually associating Mrs. Ramsay with well-known, framed pieces of visual art, Woolf highlights, through extreme examples, the inescapable “flatness” of characterization. While the juxtapositions with royalty, both political and artistic, add a mythic and regal quality to the image of Mrs. Ramsay, they also serve to flatten her character by drawing the reader’s attention to the similarity of Mrs. Ramsay and the framed image. Diane Filby Gillespie notes that, in Woolf’s later novels, “people compared to works of art lose their individuality...” (215). The reader does get little sense of Mrs. Ramsay as an individual; there are glimpses of her thoughts, but these thoughts are always directed outward. For example, at dinner, Mrs. Ramsay thinks to herself: “Everybody could see...There was Rose gazing at her father, there was Roger gazing at his father...” (96). Here, Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts are not just directed outward, but devoted to watching her children look outward instead of inward as well, suggesting the endless cycle of a framed existence.

Each and every character in the first section of the novel is drawn to the image of Mrs. Ramsay. In “looking together,” the characters not only share a focal point, but derive pleasure from fantasizing about others’ perspectives of Mrs. Ramsay (97). Character interaction is reduced to the intersection of individual stares. For example, Lily derives pleasure in watching Mr. Bankes look at Mrs. Ramsay: “For [Mr. Bankes] to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men (and perhaps Mrs. Ramsay had never excited the loves of dozens

of men)” (47). This “rapture” makes Lily forget what she is about to say, but she does not care:

It was nothing of importance...it paled beside this ‘rapture,’ this silent stare, for which she felt intense gratitude; for nothing so solaced her, eased her of the perplexity of life, and miraculously raised its burdens. As this sublime power...and no one would no more disturb it than break up the shaft of sunlight, lying level across the floor. (48)

With this scene, Woolf makes clear that “silent stares” provide more information in this novel than conversation or action. The novel continually provides us scenes of characters framing other characters framing other characters, creating a *mise-en-abîme* of narrative framing in order to portray the impossibility of piercing a representation.

Douglas Mao employs the importance of “looking together” in his reading of the role objects play in *To the Lighthouse*. In *Solid Objects*, Mao incorporates the idea of “looking together” as a means of declaring what is seen as an aesthetic object, which underscores the importance of the visual in determining an object’s value. Douglas Mao uses the scene at the dinner table to argue the case of “intersubjective mediation by the object” (54). While Mao sees the centerpiece as the object, his argument subtly aligns Mrs. Ramsay with the centerpiece, suggesting she functions as an object as well. In this scene, Mrs. Ramsay, studying the centerpiece made by Rose, observes Mr. Carmichael doing the same and thinks how “looking together united them” (97). Mao notes that Lily and William Bankes are also drawn together in gazing at Mrs. Ramsay. In recalling the scene where Bankes and Lily are united in looking at Mrs. Ramsay, Mao’s argument

equates Mrs. Ramsay with the centerpiece, which again defines Mrs. Ramsay as an object that must remain framed for others to look at.

At this dinner, and throughout the novel, characters are perpetually aware of who is “gazing” at whom. As one can tell from the dinner scene, the description of dinner is focused more on silent exchanges of glances than dialogue. At the table, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay look at each other from opposite ends of the long table and “send questions and answers across, (each knowing exactly what the other felt)” by the look of the other (96). By having the conversation transmitted visually rather than verbally, Woolf questions the possibility of traditional “table talk” at dinner parties and suggests conversation is more a product of what is seen, not said, which further separates characters by placing them in inescapable frames.

Woolf suggests family is just another arbitrary frame through the Ramsay’s family’s lack of interaction with each other. Actual physical, verbal, or mental interaction never occurs among the Ramsay family. Any interaction among family members results solely from observations of framed images. For example, Prue does not voice her admiration for her mother, but instead expresses silently while watching her mother framed in the staircase window: “That’s my mother...Yes; Minta should look at her; Paul Raley should look at her. That is the thing itself, she felt, as if there were only one person like that in the world; her mother” (116). With this thought, Prue acknowledges the framed image of Mrs. Ramsay is the “thing itself,” and the “as if” suggests Prue understands the manufactured quality of even the image of her own mother. Prue’s insistence that Paul and Minta look at her mother underscores the fact that Mrs. Ramsay

exists only in the frames other characters place around her. Her character survives on the looks of others.

Mr. Ramsay's relationship with the family is also based on looking at framed images (from outside the frame). After making an unsuccessful effort to be part of the central image of the novel (and subsequently his family) by reaching in through the window to "sheepishly prod his son's bare legs," Mr. Ramsay distances himself from the house in hopes of gaining perspective, but continues to look at his wife and son in the window:

as one raises one's eyes from a page in an express train and sees a farm, a tree, a cluster of cottages as an illustration, a confirmation of something on the printed page to which one returns, fortified, and satisfied, so without his distinguishing either his son or his wife, the sight of them fortified him and satisfied him and consecrated his effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind. (33)

While Mr. Ramsay reaches through the window much like Septimus does (albeit more dramatically) in *Mrs. Dalloway*, his reaching through the window does not suggest that he, like Septimus, can see through the frame, but instead that he wishes to be part of a frame to which he has no access. In describing Mrs. Ramsay and James as an "illustration," Woolf calls attention to the distanced and "framed" nature of Mr. Ramsay's understanding of Mrs. Ramsay and James. It is not his familial ties that consecrates Mr. Ramsay's efforts "to get to 'R'," but importantly just the "sight of them" (34, 33). Mr. Ramsay's imagined train scene underscores the lack of physical movement in the novel. While Cam seems to break up the stillness of the first thirty pages of the



novel by whizzing by Lily's easel, the majority of the novel consists of characters frozen in poses.

While the novel's title suggests it is about going to a lighthouse, it is actually much more about remaining still. Even when James and Mr. Ramsay finally go to the lighthouse, the description is primarily focused on the poses the characters assume in the boat. There is little description of movement even in "travel." By omitting any sense of progressive physical travel or movement, Woolf underscores the theme of static images in the text, furthering the idea of characters occupying frames rather than three-dimensional space in the novel.

Mrs. Ramsay briefly exits her frame for the first time in the foregrounding narrative of the text at the close of the eleventh chapter of the first section:

He turned and saw her. Ah! She was lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought.

But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her. He wanted urgently to speak to her now that James was gone and she was alone at last. But he resolved, no...He would let her be, and he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she should look so distant, and he could not reach her ...And again he would have passed her without a word had she not, at that very moment, given him of her own free will what she knew he would never ask, and called to him and taken the green shawl off the picture frame, and gone to him. For he wished, she knew, to protect her. (65)

In having Mrs. Ramsay take the green shawl off the picture frame, Woolf again reminds the reader of Mrs. Ramsay's pose up to this point in the novel. By removing the green shawl, Mrs. Ramsay takes part of the background of her portrait with her, making her, in

a way, a moving tableau. Mrs. Ramsay folds the green shawl about her shoulders at the beginning of chapter twelve, subtly suggesting an encasement even in movement and denying any type of emancipation for Mrs. Ramsay—the frame seems to follow her. Mrs. Ramsay is often described as being encased in one form or another, suggesting an almost cocoon-like quality of her character: “Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself” (38). The cocoon-like descriptions of Mrs. Ramsay suggest she is a character perpetually encased. Mrs. Ramsay is never without her shawl for long. She asks Rose to pick out a shawl for her before dinner. When Mrs. Ramsay takes off her shawl and wraps it around the boar’s skull, while putting her children to bed, she immediately pulls down the window to feel the night air, again framing her in a window. Mrs. Ramsay quickly draws Minta’s wrap around her when she gets downstairs and goes to read with her husband. The way Mrs. Ramsay’s frames seem to follow her suggest that without frames, Mrs. Ramsay does not exist.

...

Of the central section of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf wrote in her diary: “Here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing—I have to give an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to” (87). The death of Mrs. Ramsay allows Mrs. McNab to become the central framed character. Unlike the other sections of the novel, there are no characters to frame Mrs. McNab for the reader. Without other characters, the section is virtually “all eyeless” (87). With this construction, Woolf experiments with even an “eyeless” narrative’s dependence upon framed images. Mrs. McNab goes to the mirror repeatedly throughout the section, giving

the reader a description of character through a framed image. This section, though it has virtually no characters and no exchanges of glances, is still very much about looking for framed images, even if they are self-portraits.

Through Mrs. McNab's encounters with the mirror, Woolf establishes narrative's dependency on frames. At the beginning of the section, Mrs. McNab seems to court her own image in the mirror:

Rubbing the glass of the long looking-glass and leering sideways at her swinging figure... her sidelong leer which slipped and turned aside even from her own face and her own sorrows, and [she] stood and gaped in the glass, aimlessly smiling, and began again the old amble and hobble, taking up mats, putting down china, looking sideways in the glass, as if, after all, she had her consolations, as if indeed there twined about her dirge some incorrigible hope. (131)

Mrs. McNab's exchange with the looking glass suggests the impulse for visual verification of existence and being. In an empty house, Mrs. McNab looks for something that will solidify and visualize her own existence. Once she looks at herself in the looking-glass, her own image seems to slip off her face and become a separate and framed image which she can then analyze, highlighting the space between self and image of that self. Her "sidelong" leer "slips" and "turns" away from her own face and she is able to see herself, which serves as the only reminder of life in the section.

While in this encounter with the looking-glass, Mrs. McNab looks at herself from a side angle; she later stands arms akimbo in front of the looking-glass. The change in pose signals a change in character and insinuates a gained confidence in Mrs. McNab. It is at this point she begins imagining what it would be like to see to the house in the

future. With both of these exchanges, Mrs. McNab experiments with different frames of her own character; the first being the nervous and extremely self-aware house maid and the second being a more confident house keeper who has made the house her own. In depicting a character framing herself as different characters within the same chapter, Woolf again probes the existence of an actual self outside representations of it.

Like the characters in the other sections of the novel, Mrs. McNab recalls her own vision of Mrs. Ramsay: “She could see her, as came up the drive with the washing, stooping over her flowers... She could see her now, stooping over flowers, faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak” (136). Mrs. McNab’s insistence that “She could see her” implies Mrs. McNab is trying to convince herself Mrs. Ramsay actually existed because she can still *see* her. By the close of the section, Mrs. McNab continues to dip into the past as a means of framing what exists in the visual: “The telescope fitted itself to Mrs. McNab’s eyes and in a ring of light she saw the old gentleman, lean as a rake, wagging his head, as she came up with the washing” (140). The attention to the telescope underscores the distance between past and present frames. The present frame of this section is a lonely maid looking into a looking glass; thus the looking-glass seems to be the instrument of the present, while the telescope represents a far-sighted memory of a scene, or frame. Both the looking-glass and telescope place characters “behind a pane of glass” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 273). While the section may be virtually “eyeless,” Woolf continues to employ character through strictly visual representations, suggesting this is all we can do.

...

About *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf writes in her diary: “The one I have in view is about perspective” (82). The obsessive impulse to see throughout the novel culminates in the final section by bringing issues of perspective to the foreground. The final section furthers the theme of the framed image initiated in the first two sections, but also transfers the emphasis from object to viewer. Lily thinks: “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with...Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (198). Seeing becomes an act less about representing the object accurately and more an act of confirming an imagined narrative, defining a character in a frame. Even after Mrs. Ramsay has died, Lily still feels the need to see her. Like Mrs. McNab, she recalls framed images of Mrs. Ramsay in an attempt to create her own framed portrait. Like the second section, the final section poses a possible problem for the narrative: how do you finish a portrait when your subject is no longer posing? Lily digs into the past and uses her past mental portraits of Mrs. Ramsay to reconstruct her vision. Woolf experiments with the longevity of framed images and shows that even after death, characters often remain as posed objects in memory and narrative.

In “The Impact of Post-Impressionism,” Sue Roe argues “narrative too must find a way of remembering” (183). Remembering consists of “collecting impressions” (172). When trying to remember the Rayleys, Lily remembers what Paul and Minta were wearing, where they were standing, what they were holding, but cannot remember what they said, wondering “if by looking she could hear them” (172). Lily’s memory is entirely based in the visual. Because she cannot remember what they said, she creates an imaginary dialogue between her visual impressions of Paul and Minta, investing the visual with emotional and fictional value.

Significantly, Mrs. Ramsay remains in similar frames in both past and present narratives, which suggests Mrs. Ramsay occupies the same space regardless of temporal and setting shifts. Roe argues one reason Lily has difficulty in depicting Mrs. Ramsay is that “she cannot admit the past into the present: when she eventually finishes the painting, it is because she can finally juxtapose Mrs. Ramsay seen with Mrs. Ramsay remembered” (183). I would argue that it is not a juxtapositioning of the past and present, but instead a mapping of one onto the other that suggests characters occupy the same frame regardless of time. In other words, Mrs. Ramsay sitting on the steps reading to James *is* Mrs. Ramsay—Mrs. Ramsay “seen” *is* Mrs. Ramsay “remembered.”

Mao suggests Woolf solves the crisis of meaning and remembering through Lily’s completion of her art:

The coincidence of the closing of the novel with Lily’s completed work suggests that in painting Lily addresses not only Mrs. Ramsay’s haunting, but also a more general crisis of meaning: both are resolved, if only temporarily, by the fashioning of art, that intervention in the material that sustains the miracle and ecstasy of the human dead and the object world, and yet also brings them into ordinary experience, relieving the one of its capacity to torment and the other of its power to frighten. (63)

While Lily does restate her question, “What does it mean, what does it all mean?”, at the beginning of the final section of the novel, that section is less about a crisis of meaning and more about a crisis of remembering a moment—remembering its defining frame (145). There is little description about what Mrs. Ramsay *means* to Lily, and much detail about what Mrs. Ramsay *represents* for Lily—how Lily saw her in one specific moment

of time. The last section, I would argue, declares deciphering the meaning of framed images impossible and suggests one's final vision of character is simply your first memories of the character's frame, not a dramatic, transcendent re-envisioning of the character, but instead a further conflation of the character's existence and frame.

Lily, in the final section, wants to see everything and hopes that, at forty-four, her perspective will finally allow her to represent things as she sees them. With this attempt to portray what she sees, Lily returns to three of her most vivid images of Mrs. Ramsay. She first recalls the beach scene: "When she thought of herself...and the whole scene at the beach, it seemed to depend somehow upon Mrs. Ramsay sitting under a rock, with a pad on her knee, writing letters...That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity...there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art" (160-161). With this memory, Lily separates and frames Mrs. Ramsay apart from the rest of the beach scene the way James cuts out the catalogue illustrations. She remembers a specific pose of Mrs. Ramsay's and makes it the focal point and defining image of that memory. After she conjures up that image, she shifts and looks at the steps where she can still see Mrs. Ramsay sitting framed in the window. She then remembers Mrs. Ramsay standing in the doorway at dinner as if to say "Life stand still here," a statement that gestures to the main theme of the novel (161). By having Lily remember these portraits consecutively, Woolf constructs Lily's "vision" as the product of a series of previous framed images instead of newly composed image. Lily seems unable to incorporate these visions into a final vision. While Lily can view much of Mrs. Ramsay's life from an even more distanced perspective now that she is gone, her vision is stuck on the earlier visual portraits framed in her memory. What pushes Lily to declare

“I have had my vision” is not a final discovery of Mrs. Ramsay, but instead a final reframing of earlier frames (209). By closing the novel with what can be seen as a counterfeit claim, Woolf points to the impulse to frame a final visual image as a means of securing existence and a memory of that existence. Lily’s final statement layers yet another two-dimensional frame on the narrative.

Sue Roe argues that while the human form may be in constant flux, seeing fixes and frames the form:

What we---human beings, human forms---really consist of is ever-changing, formless. We are the seers, in control of what is seen, and things only become fixed or offer complete containment once we have decided to select what we see...What Virginia Woolf examined in her fiction, however, but this kind of freedom is troubling to us. (180)

Roe’s argument speaks to the importance of seeing in Woolf’s novels and acknowledges the difficulty in seeing character in the novel as anything more than what is: a formless entity fixed and created merely by representations we choose to see. Lily’s difficulty with this task suggests the power and inescapability of initial frames. The last section suggests complete perspective does not result in a more accurate creation of image or character, which is a theme implied in Woolf’s experiments with placing the power to describe in the eyes of the characters rather than narrator, who supposedly has more of an overall perspective.

...

Allen McLaurin acknowledges that there are “certain isolated ‘moments of vision’” throughout the novel, but suggests that “we are meant to see the whole of the



novel in a flash when we have read the last word” (206). While the final words of the novel, “I have had my vision,” do imply a type of synthesis, Lily’s statement also seems to imply a type of imaginative failure rather than transcendent resolution. Lily has had her vision, but neither she nor the reader truly sees or understands this vision. Through Lily’s vision, Woolf makes us recognize that knowledge of others is always mediated, limited and framed by what we can see, so that when Lily proclaims she has “had her vision,” she actually acknowledges (whether she knows it or not) the limitations and inadequacy of her frame of Mrs. Ramsay. Thus, Lily’s vision represents Woolf’s own anxieties about the impossibilities of representing identity in anything other than a limited, framed way—a sequence of “visions” that might not add up to anything. What is at stake with this alternative reading of the novel is the very idea of realism itself. In constructing her characters as series of framed images that do not add up to a whole portrait, Woolf questions the possibility of creating a character without a frame. Woolf explores the freedom this conclusion allows her in *Orlando*.

## CHAPTER 4: A Look at the “Wild Goose Chase”: Woolf’s Frustration with Her Own Frames

In 1927, one year before *Orlando* was published, E. M. Forster suggested in *Aspects of the Novel* the necessity for flat characters: “a novel that is at all complex often requires flat people...Dickens’ people all are nearly all flat...nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence...he is actually one of our big writers, and his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness” (108-9). In *Orlando*, Woolf exploits and literalizes Forster’s claim “that there may be more in flatness” by interspersing copies of photographs and portraits throughout the novel to supplement the verbal portraits of characters in the novel. Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, which both attempt to proclaim the capturing of their own characters, but these proclamations, instead, highlight, how the characters have escaped from not only the narrative frame by the reader’s frame of vision as well. *Orlando*, on the other hand, ends in complete abstraction, insinuating the close of the novel has only brought the reader to end of the “wild goose chase.”

Toward the beginning of *Orlando*, Woolf centers the plot around framed images of her characters in windows, as she does in her earlier two novels. But as the novel progresses, windows provide fewer impressions, highlighting her frustration with even her own model. In *Orlando*, Woolf yet again calls attention to the way we read character and the conventions that have “framed” character for centuries. *Orlando* continues to distance the space between art and life and trouble the notion of verisimilitude in the novel by pointing out the difficulty in securing the existence of a self. On November 7,

1928, Woolf writes in her diary: “I want ...to give things their caricature value” (134). Perhaps in claiming that she hopes to give things their “caricature value” in *Orlando*, Woolf resigns herself to the impossibility of character and admits attempts at character are mere caricatures at best, which aligns her characters with a type of Dickensian anti-realism and signals a return to an older pre-realistic novel notion of character.

...

Woolf provides a model for the inherently anti-realistic nature of character with the coffee house scene toward the end of the novel. In this scene, Orlando passes a coffee house on the way home and stops to look in the windows for more than an hour. At this point in the novel, Woolf overtly draws attention to the function of windows as frames and provides yet another narrative moment where observation serves as a substitute for interaction, thus further distancing and flattening characters. From the street outside the coffee house, Orlando “watch[es] three shadows on the blind drinking together in a house” (222). We are given little description of these shadows except the shapes their bodies form through the window. Orlando assigns these shadows names, “Dr. Johnson, Mr. Boswell, and Mrs. Williams,” which seem fabricated and constructed because there is no plausible way Orlando could know the names of these patrons (222). Her conflation of historical and fictional value in this scene subtly comments on the way readers of Samuel Johnson know him almost entirely through the frame of Boswell’s famous biography of him. In this way, the scene serves as a mini-reenactment of what Woolf saw as the process for creating character: observe, frame, and name.

After assigning the scene fictional value, Orlando is “so absorbed in the sight, that she forgot to think how other ages would have envied her...it seems probably that on this

occasion they would. She was content to gaze and gaze...there rolled out the most magnificent phrases that have ever left human lips; so Orlando thought...though she never heard a word that any of the three shadows said” (223). Orlando looks in from the outside, in to the coffee house, instead of from the inside out. By positioning Orlando outside of the house, Woolf calls attention to character’s dependence on the voyeur, whether it is the narrator, another character, or even the reader. In order for characters to exist, someone must be observing them.

...

We first encounter a framed character in the picture of a comfortably seated poet musing in Mrs. Stewkley’s sitting room. With Orlando, we peer through the open-door of the sitting room to see the poet seated at the table, pen in hand, staring into space. The passage closes with the phrase, “He did not see Orlando,” which emphasizes the tableau-like quality of the image of the poet (22). Orlando’s entire encounter with the poet is a restrained observation, which denies Orlando and the poet any multi-dimensional value. The same framed image of the poet, which Orlando later calls her “most persistent memory,” comes back to haunt her later in the novel, underlining the idea of the static, leisurely intellectual, and insinuating that perhaps the poet has remained seated at the table frozen inside his frame as “the poet” throughout the action of the novel (164). Gillespie suggests “Woolf analyzes the portrait-making process within the portraits she creates. Her characters often begin with a ‘type’” (217). In *Orlando*, characters don’t just *begin* as “types”, but remain framed as types throughout the novel, suggesting that character is simply a glorified “type.”

The Archduchess Harriet Griselda also has trouble escaping her frame throughout the first half of the novel. In fact, it is not until she disrobes and reveals she is actually a man that Woolf presents Harriet outside of a window frame. When Orlando first sees Harriet, he observes her through his window crossing the quadrangle below his room. The first description we are given of Harriet is that of “a very tall lady in riding hood and mantle,” framed within Orlando’s window (113). Significantly, the second time the Archduchess appears, she is described at first as a “familiar...grotesque shadow” framed in Orlando’s window and is transformed into the hare Orlando wishes her to be (177). Like “the poet,” the Archduchess seems to have been trapped inside her original frame, a frame in which Orlando subjectively places her. The first time Orlando sees the Archduchess in his window, she is also described at first as a “shadow.” By describing the Archduchess initially as a “shadow,” Woolf calls attention to the fact Orlando transforms a shape he cannot see into an animated character. By having characters animate other characters, Woolf comments on the creative and imaginative core of character presentation in the novel and underlines character as the product of individual perception, rather than the attempt of realism. The reproduction of framed images of characters throughout the novel also draws attention to the notion that characters are artistic representations of fixed surface. During his second encounter with the Archduchess, Orlando again frames Harriet as a hare: “She stopped now, much as a hare sits erect in the corn, when thinking itself unobserved and stared at Orlando, who stared back at her from the window” (177-78). The recurrence of these framed images reinforces the presence of crystallized and often grotesque portraits of characters in the novel. Woolf’s use of the window here not only serves as a means through which the

characters exchange gazes, but an important divide between display and onlooker, subject and artist, reminding each counterpart of their dependence on the other for proof of existence.

...

The photographs and paintings interspersed throughout the novel combine to make the flattening of characters more concretely visual. In the original Hogarth edition of the novel, Woolf places opposite Orlando's verbal caricature of the Archduchess Harriet a painting that is supposed to be a portrait of the Archduchess, but is, in reality, an image of Mary, the 4<sup>th</sup> countess of England. By juxtaposing the verbal and visual frames, Woolf provides an ekphrastic moment in the text where word and image compete for the right to frame. Woolf's placement of the portrait also creates a moment where the narrator edits Orlando's vision and offers his or her own framed vision. The portrait of "Orlando as a Boy," which is really a portrait of Edward Sackville's son, serves as the frontispiece to the novel. By placing this portrait at the beginning of the novel, Woolf makes the understanding of character dually visual and verbal, draws attention to the construction of both and also points to their falsity and unreliability, since both character and portraits claim to represent something they are not. Significantly, the verbal portraits and caricatures of the characters written in the novel serve the same function as the visual portraits reproduced in the novel, in that they offer us no greater sense of character. Aside from Orlando, the other characters are described strictly in terms of their physical appearance. We are given little description of characters' inner thoughts (aside from Orlando's), which serves to flatten the representation of character and equalize verbal portraits and visual portraits in the novel, reading with looking.

...

With her use of windows as frames, Woolf calls attention to the act of seeing in the novel. The scenes in which the characters are framed lead to questions of control and of identifying who is in charge of positing these framed images in the foreground of the text. To begin answering this question, it is essential to look for those who escape the frame in the text. Orlando is not one of them. We see him in the frames of a window twice in the first pages of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator invites the reader to look at Orlando as if he is on display. Through the narrator's positioning of Orlando, Woolf situates issues of perception in the foreground of the novel right from the beginning. When Orlando pushes the window of his room open "it was instantly coloured red, blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing...those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though...all of [him] [was] decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face...was lit solely by the sun itself" (14). By portraying Orlando in terms of color and light, Woolf seems to literally paint Orlando for the reader, thus making him part of composition within the frame of the window.

On the next page, the narrator seems to have full control of the narrative and states "for directly we glance at Orlando standing by the window, we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets...and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples" (15). Here the narrator assumes a collective voice, which seems to include the narrator and the reader and even a museum curator lecturing a group on the composition of a piece. The narrator's positioning of Orlando emphasizes that, at this point in the novel, he is the object of

display. The narrator pointedly reminds the reader of this with the statement: “Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career” (15). While “cut out” could be used here in the figurative sense, the passive use of the phrase implies Orlando is a cut-out figure propped against the window, instead of living, breathing character. “Cut out” is a phrase used in this sense in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* as well, suggesting Woolf’s preoccupation with excising character from context and presenting it in its own frame. “To look at” Orlando is to define him as a poet. Later in the novel, the narrator reanimates this image with the female Orlando, but it is still how she looks that defines her as a writer.

While there are few times Orlando is singularly framed in the novel, one could also argue that the window panes and door frames operate in both directions—reciprocally framing both observer and observed, so that not just the minor characters may find themselves within frames. This reading of Orlando challenges critics such as Allen McLaurin, who argue that Woolf’s artist figures “cannot be pinned down to certain traits” (169). While Orlando does transgress all boundaries—gender, history, time—the few times that Orlando is framed and “cut out” for the reader remind the reader of the inherently “pinned down” nature of character. Despite Orlando’s various changes, the character remains fundamentally static and unknown to the reader. Adam Parkes argues “the identity of Orlando merely consists of a series of external signs” (10). While these “external signs” may cause readers to think they know Orlando, as Parkes’s statement implies, Woolf employs these “signs” as a way of displaying Orlando’s lack of identity. It is precisely Orlando’s lack of depth across his/her various identity shifts that reveal the futility of representing a self. If the frames do serve a double function in the text, the



narrator often robs the reader of a description of Orlando at that moment and relies solely on the reader to create the image of the hero/heroine looking out of the window. By omitting a description of Orlando framed in the window while he observes other characters, Woolf recruits the reader to draw the framed image and reminds the reader that character depends on who has the power of seeing in the novel.

...

The definition of character in this novel often depends on how Orlando *sees* another character. The framing function of windows and door frames highlights this issue, but images of light and darkness also underscore the importance of seeing in the novel. The scene where Orlando rides home with Alexander Pope in the carriage not only provokes the reader to consider how themes of perception operate in the novel, but allows the reader to see Orlando considering these themes. Perhaps taking the lead from Vanessa Bell,<sup>1</sup> who repeatedly used profiles in her portraits and drawings, Orlando only sees Pope's profile framed within the carriage window and Pope is never described as facing Orlando throughout the whole ride home. The profile seems appropriate here because it underlines the flatness of characters in the novel and allows Orlando to imagine the other aspects of his character. The narrator describes the carriage-ride home:

Lamp posts lit with oil-lamps occurred every two hundred yards or so, but between lay a considerable stretch of pitch darkness. Thus for ten minutes Orlando and Mr. Pope would be in blackness; and then for about half a minute again in the light. A very strange state of mind was thus bred in Orlando. As the light faded, she began to feel steal over her the most delicious balm. 'This is

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<sup>1</sup> The dust jacket Bell designed for the collection of letters of Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, published in 1956 by the Hogarth Press, displays two framed profiles as substitutes for figures of Strachey and Woolf.

indeed a very great honour for a young woman, to be driving with Mr. Pope,' she began to think, looking at the outline of his nose....Here came the lamp post again. 'What a foolish wretch I am!'...But here again was darkness. Her illusion revived. 'How noble his brow is,' she thought (mistaking a hump on a cushion for Mr. Pope's forehead in the darkness). (205)

With this scene, Woolf allows the reader to experience Orlando's swings in perception alongside Orlando. In the light, Orlando is repulsed by Pope, but her illusion revives in the dark and she is able to aestheticize and romanticize her experience, all the while only looking at half of Pope's face. With each turn in the drive, Pope becomes a different character depending on the way Orlando sees him, again highlighting the power of framing and pointing out that what we see as "real" is only a function of our perspective. In depicting this encounter between the fictional Orlando and Pope, Woolf conflates historical and fictional value and suggests even historical figures are subject to arbitrary frames. In this scene, the reader experiences the volatility of defining character in Woolf's novels, reminiscent of Lily Briscoe's perception of Mr. Tansley in *To the Lighthouse*: "Her own idea of him was grotesque; [she] knew well ... half one's notions of other people were, after all grotesque. They served private purposes of one's own" (197). Pope is repeatedly painted in a grotesque manner; he is described as "some squat reptile set with a burning topaz in its forehead," whose tongue "flicker[s] like a lizard's" (202, 209). By portraying one of the most well-known poets of the eighteenth century in this manner in a biography that seems to be anything but biographical and historical, Woolf highlights the subjectivity of character construction. Through Orlando's range of

vision, Woolf plays out the importance of perception and reminds the reader that character exists only as an image to be looked at and observed.

...

Toward the end of the novel, the narrator walks us through the creation of fiction, self-reflexively expressing his or her own frustration as an instrument for creating fiction: “The only resource now left us is to look out of the window. There were sparrows; there were starlings; there were a number of doves, and one or two rooks, all occupied after their fashion” (269). Here, looking out onto life serves as a last resource for the narrator, instead of impetus for spontaneous creation. The scene framed in this window lacks the vividness and description of the earlier framed images. The narrator sees a “servant cross the courtyard, wearing a green baize apron” and attempts to create a story surrounding this image: “Presumably he is engaged on some intrigue with one of the maids in the pantry, but as no visible proof is offered us, in the courtyard, we can but hope for the best and leave it” (269-270). This attempt at fiction confesses its own inadequacy and the narrator doubts the veracity of her own vision. The uncertainty of the narrator’s gender suggests another kind of indefiniteness or resistance to the usual categories of character.

Orlando also goes to the window, which earlier in the novel promptly provides her with animated impressions of characters, and must wait days for something to step into view: “Indeed one might stand there ten minutes or more, as Orlando stood now, without seeing a single barouche landau. ‘Look at that!’ she exclaimed, some days later when an absurd truncated carriage without any horses began to glide about of its own accord” (296). Not only must Orlando wait days for a vision, but when one finally comes into the frame of her window the image is mechanical and lacks any pictorial possibility.

In the course of the novel, windows go from serving as creative instruments, framing vivid and outlandish pictures of characters, to “mere holes in a dead wall” through which hope for creation is lost (James 5).

...

In many ways, *Orlando* is itself an imaginative dead-end that sheds no real light on one’s own or other’s real self. *Orlando*, with its shifts in genre, sex, and historical period, laughs not only at the possibility of a self beyond the representation, but the possibility of frames as well. In the final novel of her “frame series,” Woolf suggests even the two-dimensional framing that the preceding novels offer as a gesture toward the representation of the self is a waste of time. *Orlando* extinguishes Woolf’s fixation on frames as a means of representing the difficulty of character and provokes Woolf to scratch out yet another formula and try a new method in *The Waves* (1931) and *Between the Acts* (1941).

## CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

It is clear that Virginia Woolf struggled with the questions: Does a self exist outside of others' perception of that self? And, if so, is it possible to accurately represent that self? Throughout her career, much like a mathematician with no calculator uses a pencil and a blank sheet of paper to solve a long and complicated problem, Woolf utilized her writing as a space to work through these nagging questions, perpetually scratching out previous formulas and trying different methods in an effort to come up with a value to solve the problematic equation. Woolf, however, never arrived at a solution that defines the value of character in her novels. Instead, the value of Woolf's characters resides in their elusiveness, in their questioning of their own existence. Unlike the mathematician whose success depends upon the solution, Woolf's success lies in her inability to solve the problem: her estimation of character value resides somewhere in the recurrent scratching out of formulas and ceaseless refiguring of the question.

While Woolf's pursuit of character is easily detected in every novel, it is the perpetual and relatively rapid revisions of this project from the years 1925-1928 that make *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* most representative of Woolf's struggle with character. Each novel ultimately seems to confirm the statement made in *Jacob's Room* that "It is no use trying to sum people up," but, in each novel Woolf displays her inability to give up trying (37). Woolf poses the implications of this statement from a somewhat distanced and overtly framed perspective, which prevents the reader from reading outside of the frame and allows the novels to simultaneously construct and comment on the value of character. The fact that Woolf makes frame and character inextricably connected in each of these novels denies the existence of a self

beyond appearance through the novel's narrative structure alone. It is her perpetual layering of multiple frames on to this narrative structure that makes Woolf's use of frames fascinating. In each of these novels, Woolf not only questions the possibility of character, but taunts the reader to turn the frame on himself as well. She encourages him to question not just the existence of the characters, but the existence of himself as well. It is this self-reflexive quality of Woolf's pursuit of "Brown" that makes Woolf's novels inherently problematic. In order to grasp the gravity of Woolf's struggle with character value, we must be able to question our own existence, be able to probe the easily recognizable edges that define us.

...

Woolf's obsessive pursuit of existence beyond the frame perhaps fueled her experiments with biography, a genre defined by its claim of capturing a complete self. Unable to confirm the existence of a "real" self through her fiction, Woolf attempts biography in her late career. Woolf writes a total of three biographies, two of which (*Orlando* and *Flush* (1933)) are possibly Woolf's nod to the absurdity of the genre and one non-fictional (if one thinks this possible) biography, *Roger Fry* (1940), which Woolf believed to be an utter failure. Hermione Lee writes in her biography that Woolf "talked again and again about the worthlessness of her biographies" around the time of her suicide and that she repeatedly called them "failures" (745). However, we can view what Woolf saw as her final failures as her defining success. In attempting to write the history of individual lives (in fiction and non-fiction), Woolf dramatizes the questions that most define her career.

Someone who obsessively chronicled her own life, Woolf explored the implications of these questions in her own life in her diary. On March 20, 1926, Woolf wonders about the frame that will be placed around her own life:

But what is to become of all these diaries, I asked myself yesterday. If I died, what would Leo make of them? He would be disinclined to burn them; he could not publish them. Well, he should make up a book from them, I think; and then burn the body. I daresay there is a little book in them; if the scraps and scratching were straightened out a little. God knows. This is dictated by a slight melancholia, which comes upon me sometimes now and makes me think I am old; I am ugly. I am repeating things. Yes, as far as I know, as a writer I am only now writing out my mind. (87)

With this entry, Woolf anticipates how she will be framed and seems to recognize the futility of her attempts at capturing even her own character. This entry foreshadows what would happen twenty-six years later when Leonard Woolf would publish *A Writer's Diary* (1953), a collection of Woolf's diary entries he believed most accurately represented Woolf. In the preface to the collection he admits to the impossibility of presenting a full portrait. He writes:

At the best and even unexpurgated, diaries give a distorted or one-side portrait of the writer, because, as Virginia Woolf herself remarks somewhere in these diaries, one gets into the habit of recording one particular kind of mood—irritation or misery, say---and of not writing one's diary when one is feeling the opposite. The portrait is therefore from the start unbalanced, and, if someone then deliberately removes another characteristic, it may well become mere caricature. (viii)

Leonard's questioning of even a diary's ability to accurately depict a complete self confirms that Woolf, even in her diaries, realized the inability to capture and confirm her own existence. Biographies by Virginia Woolf and biographies about Virginia Woolf admit the potential futility of their own project, suggesting Woolf was a figure who continually attempted to define the frame of the others, while simultaneously attempting to defy her very own frame. It is her obsessive chronicling of her life despite this realization that makes Woolf such a fascinating and complex figure. In his preface, Leonard Woolf writes that when Woolf died, she left twenty six volumes of diary entries written in her own hand (vii). The sheer volume of Woolf's personal writings suggests she furiously attempted to write herself out of the frame she anticipated would be placed around her.



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