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# Reality and language in *The Voyage Out*, by Virginia Woolf

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**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses one of Virginia Woolf's greatest literary concerns: the difficulty of expressing human experience through language. The focus is on *The Voyage Out*, her first novel, published in 1915, particularly the conflicts and contrasts present not only in the trajectory of Rachel Vinrace, the main character, but also in the structure of the novel itself, which establish a constant tension between reality and language.

**Key words:** Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace, reality and language, human experience.

**RESUMO.** Realidade e linguagem em *The Voyage Out*, de Virginia Woolf. Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir uma das maiores preocupações literárias de Virginia Woolf: a dificuldade de expressar a experiência humana por meio da linguagem. Focalizamos *The Voyage Out*, seu primeiro romance, publicado em 1915, com atenção especial para os conflitos e contrastes presentes tanto na trajetória de Rachel Vinrace, a personagem principal, como na própria estruturação do romance, que instauram a tensão constante entre realidade e linguagem.

**Palavras-chave:** Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace, realidade e linguagem, experiência humana.

When Virginia Woolf finished writing *The Voyage Out* (around March 1913) and gave the manuscript to the publisher Gerald Duckworth, she was totally exhausted, and suffered a serious nervous breakdown, subsequently attempting suicide. This partially explains why the publication of her first novel took a further two years. Since October 1909, when *Cornhill* magazine had rejected the manuscript of her first piece of fiction, "Memoirs of a Novelist", she had been obsessively attempting to prove her potential as a writer. When the novel finally reached the bookshops, in March 1915, Woolf was understandably insecure about its reception by the critics. Although *The Voyage Out* was not significantly innovative, it was nonetheless negatively received, principally because of what was seen as formal inconsistency. According to the critics, the lack of a clearly defined thematic unity and the large cast of characters both contributed to an impression of formal fragility. Only a few critics were able to discern the writer's potential and to detect signs of the formal originality which would characterise Woolf's later fiction. To this day, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and day* (1919), her second novel, continue to receive less critical attention than her later novels, probably because they are seen as relatively traditional.

Of course, the interest in Virginia Woolf goes beyond her fiction and literary criticism. There are

certain aspects of her personal life which cannot be ignored when her novels are being analyzed. This close relationship between her life and her literary composition makes her writing more attractive, requiring closer attention from reader and researcher alike. However, because of its complexity, Woolf's work requires a multivalent critical approach. The critic who focuses exclusively on autobiographical or psychological elements in Virginia Woolf's fiction runs the risk of ignoring her poetic prose, her incorporation of facts from daily life, her political and social consciousness, and her search for new ways of literary expression, which are all important as well.

Virginia Woolf's extraordinary capacity as a writer of poetic prose can be discerned as early *The Voyage Out*. Critics such as Chambers (1947), Naremore (1973) and McLaurin (1973) confirm the beauty and elegance of Woolf's style:

It is well known that [...] she was concerned to give her work more of that special intensity associated with lyric poetry. What needs to be stressed, however, is that her 'poetry' [...] is qualitatively different from the writing of nearly all her great contemporaries. No matter how complex her style becomes, it remains a self-consciously lovely quality and has a certain easy elegance that sets her apart from other important twentieth-century authors (NAREMORE, 1973, p. 14).

As we shall see, this “easy elegance” was achieved as a result of extensive rewriting, an extremely laborious and painstaking process. According to Lessing (2004), what Virginia Woolf did for literature was to experiment throughout her life, trying to make her novels express what she understood as the most delicate truth about life.

Throughout her career, Woolf revealed her multiple interests, from metaphysical concerns to social criticism. In a way, she was trying not only to understand the world but also to come to terms with her childhood traumas, and consequently her relationship with reality became complicated and ambiguous. One of her main preoccupations was that of human relationships. She discusses feelings (such as happiness, love, hate and frustration), conflicts, the impossibility of real communication between men and women, marriage, life/death and other issues that refer to human interaction. Bennett (1964) discusses Woolf's emphasis on human experience in her first two novels:

Each book is a love story. Yet it is clear that it is not the width and variety of the human comedy, nor the idiosyncrasies of human character, that most interest her. Rather it is the deep and simple human experiences, love, happiness, beauty, loneliness, death. Again and again in these two books what the reader feels is not so much ‘this man or woman would have felt like that in those circumstances,’ but rather ‘Yes, that is how it feels to be in love; to be happy; to be desolate’ (BENNETT, 1964, p. 3).

Woolf was only too well aware of the difficulty of describing reality through language. In *The Voyage Out*, the central character, Rachel Vinrace, reflects on the functions of language throughout the novel. In this way Woolf introduces what was to become the most recurrent theme in her novels: the problem of how words can satisfactorily communicate human experience. For her, words are not totally able to express the inner and hidden side of human beings. Nevertheless, as a novelist, she tried to reveal, in an ordered manner, her vision of the chaos of human life. As a result, the reader faces

[...] a mode of discourse which compels [his] active participation, guiding him to the point where he can make his own intuitive leap, to apprehend a reality that will not submit to denotative prose (BISHOP, 1981, p. 343).

For this reason the function of language in Virginia Woolf's work is extremely important.

Virginia Woolf's artistic intentions were publicly announced in “Modern Fiction” and the short story “Kew Gardens”, both published in 1919. In 1908, Woolf had written a letter to Clive Bell saying that:

I think a great deal of my future, and settle what book I am to write – how I shall re-form the novel and capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes. I take a good look at woods in the sunset, and fix men who are breaking stones with an intense gaze, meant to sever them from the past and the future – all these excitements last out my walk, but tomorrow I know, I shall be sitting down to the inanimate old phrases (WOOLF apud BISHOP, 1981, p. 344).

Woolf's plans were to lead her away from traditional conceptions of plot and character towards a more radical view of human behaviour. This tendency was accompanied by a constant fluctuation in her use of language, which, according to Bishop (1981, p. 344), “strikes her by turns as an almost magical force, as a mere necessary evil, and as a betrayer of life.” *The Voyage Out* is

[...] both a groping exploration on Woolf's part of the connection between reality and language, and a dramatic portrayal of a corresponding exploration in the growth of the central character.

This tension between reality and language can be identified not only in the text of Virginia Woolf's first novel, but also in the extensive revision and rewriting to which it was subject. The revisions, modifications, additions and suppressions demonstrate a high level of anxiety and an obsessive determination to continue in spite of all difficulties. The narrative focus of the book is highly subjective, so that what is said is constantly contrasted with what is felt or thought. In analysing this contrast one can detect indications of choices Woolf was to make concerning narrative technique in her later novels. The Edwardian period (1901-1910) was a time of transition for the novel, and, in particular, the validity of the omniscient narrator, typical of the Victorian realist novel, was being called into question. In *The Voyage Out*, although the narrator does not participate directly in the story, it is possible to detect the authorial presence of Virginia Woolf filtered through the thoughts of her characters, especially with regard to questions of social criticism.

Virginia Woolf does not attempt any innovation with respect to the creation of a partially omniscient narrator in her first novel. The narrator of *The Voyage Out* is able to provide full descriptions of characters, settings and events, as well as being privy to the inner thoughts and feelings of each of the characters. However, Virginia Woolf attempts to supplement the narrator's voice by establishing an interaction between it and the voice of each of the main characters. As a result, the novel operates on two planes or levels of expression:

i) Explicit/Direct: the speech and actions of the characters, revealing levels of hierarchy and social convention, with a predominance of direct speech and description. An example can be found in this dialogue between St John Hirst and Terence Hewet: [...] ‘what’s the use of attempting to write when the world’s peopled by such damned fools? Seriously Hewet, I advise you to give up literature. What’s the good of it? There’s your audience’ (SAGE, 2001, p. 276).

ii) Implicit/Indirect: the thoughts, reflections and feelings of the characters, expressed through indirect speech and summary, as in this example:

Rachel looked round. She felt herself surrounded, like a child at a party, by the faces of strangers all hostile to her, with hooked noses and sneering, indifferent eyes. She was by a window, she pushed it open with a jerk, and stepped out into the garden. Her eyes swam with tears of rage (SAGE, 2001, p. 172).

Virginia Woolf is clearly seeking a means of adequately expressing not only what is said but also what it is hidden beneath the surface of the utterance. In *The reading of silence: Virginia Woolf in the English tradition* (1991), Patricia Laurence analyses the various forms of expressing silence in Woolf’s novels. According to the author, Woolf confronts the narrativity of silence and the cultural constraints of her time – “the ‘unsayable’, something not sayable based on the social taboos of Victorian property or something about life that is ineffable” (LAURENCE, 1991, p. 1); this silence is embodied in women and can be understood as a discourse of resistance.

What Woolf does, as a novelist of subjectivity, is to confront and narrate these silences between islands of speech, inviting us, as readers, to enter into the obscurity and to consult our own minds (LAURENCE, 1991, p. 1).

The tensions arising from the problem of adequately expressing human experience through language are central to any reading of *The Voyage Out*. The plot developed in the novel’s twenty-seven chapters is constructed on two planes: at the literal level the novel is the tale of a group of British people travelling by ship from London to Santa Marina, a fictitious port in South America; at the figurative level it depicts the trajectory of a 24-year-old young woman from innocence to experience. Thus, the novel narrates both Rachel Vinrace’s ocean voyage, her initiation into love and her premature death and, at the same time, an internal journey,

[...] that leads both inward and outward, Rachel awakens to the world at large and to her own consciousness. She discovers that life can seem very

precarious and the world entirely desolate, only to decide later that the world is a most hospitable place and life something calm and certain (BISHOP, 1981, p. 344).

Throughout the story, the main character (and also the narrator) finds it difficult to express her perceptions and ideas in words, a problem that arises as much from the intangible nature of reality as from the inadequacies of language itself.

Being essentially symbolic, *The Voyage Out* allows many possible readings. The symbolism resides in the original idea, the combination of characters, events and places, the interaction between narrator and story, the ambiguity of the language, and even the title. For some critics, the themes discussed in the novel are implicit in the title of the book. Naremore argues that:

[...] the title of the book suggests Rachel’s voyage out of the social and sexual restrictions of her life in England, her voyage out of herself, and ultimately her voyage out of life. On the literal level, these themes are represented by Rachel’s trip out from England on her father’s ship, Euphrosyne (NAREMORE, 1973, p. 7).

Since Rachel is the hub of the story, in addition to the voyage *out*, there is also a strong emphasis on a voyage “in”,

[...] that of the two lovers, symbolically represented by their journey up a river deep into the heart of the Latin American countryside, together with Virginia Woolf’s own voyage into the subjective lives of her characters (NAREMORE, 1973, p. 7).

It is axiomatic that first novels tend to have a highly autobiographic content. In the case of *The Voyage Out* it is difficult to ignore the similarities between the main characters of the novel – Rachel, Helen Ambrose, Terence Hewet, St John Hirst –, and real people in Virginia Woolf’s life, such as Julia Duckworth (mother), Vanessa (sister), Lytton Strachey (friend and literary critic), Clive Bell (brother-in-law) and Leonard Woolf (husband). The relationship between the real and the fictitious is thus another of the tensions present in the novel. However, it would be an inaccurate oversimplification to see Rachel Vinrace as a self-portrait; the differences between the character and the author become more marked as the plot develops. Most significantly, Rachel becomes ever more inarticulate, experiencing ever greater difficulties in expressing her ideas and opinions, and secluding herself in the world of music.

It has to be admitted that Rachel Vinrace is the only character who shows any real signs of development. As the novel progresses, Rachel

experiences a growth in her capacity for inner transformation, and in her ability to act according to social standards, to get along well with others, and even to fall in love. However, the process is interrupted because Rachel dies at the happiest moment of her life, having discovered love, become engaged to Hewet and awakened to her own consciousness of the external world. The comparison between Rachel and Virginia Woolf herself is inevitable. Possibly as a result of her childhood traumas, Woolf experienced great difficulty in relating to other people, which in turn made it very hard for her to cope with such questions as love, marriage, social behaviour, and the limit between the real and the imaginary.

In *The Voyage Out*, society is shown to be governed by traditional, patriarchal values, so that women are not only excluded from political life, but are generally understood to be incapable of any intellectual activity whatsoever. Looking at society through Rachel's eyes, the reader perceives how human relationships are influenced by the powerful ideological forces in this patriarchal society, at a time when great changes were beginning to take place. According to Lorna Sage, one of Virginia Woolf's strategies is to present Rachel as a *tabula rasa* – “a mental virgin on whom others are tempted to impress their tastes”. She is “a ‘vessel’ in more senses than one. People want to form her and ‘bring her out’” (WOOLF, 2001, p. 20) every other character wants to teach her something. On the other hand, Sage explains that Virginia Woolf

[...] is interested in trying to get at what is formless and undecided in Rachel. Which is perhaps another way of saying that Woolf is searching for her own style, trying to write her way past the accumulated meanings that literary tradition had loaded on to young women (WOOLF, 2001, p. 20).

Virginia Woolf focuses principally upon the subjective experience of her characters, so that the reader is granted both external and internal vision. Woolf's treatment of consciousness involves the employment of indirect quotations and metaphors in order to describe an emotional state, dream or even a thought. Thus, Rachel's widening experience of life is portrayed through the capture of instants of reality – “moments of being”, which are associated with and, at the same time, foreshadow the idea of death. These moments of being are instants of almost visionary insight, in which Woolf's understanding of life is sharply and somewhat disconcertingly enhanced. Sleep, hypnotic moods, death and elemental passion are some of the commonest means which enable the characters to

apprehend reality in Woolf's novels. This brief experience of entering into the deeper world of intense feeling points up the author's special approach to the novel and her peculiar writing style. According to Lessing (2004, p. 11), “her style was an attempt to use her sensibility to make life the ‘luminous halo’, which she insisted to be our consciousness”.

Another aspect of *The Voyage Out* which carries a considerable symbolic weight is that of physical setting. The main settings are London, the Euphrosyne and Santa Marina. The last of these serves as the stage for the novel's major conflicts between the individual and society, as well as for Rachel's final attempt to adapt herself to the external world. The presence of Nature in *The Voyage Out* is also extremely important. Landscape in the novel is not merely scenery, it is a grouping together of symbols. The novel is permeated by the presence of the sea, rivers and the countryside. The sea is a leitmotif in the novel, representing Rachel's inspiration and her destiny. All the narrative tensions appear to be linked by the ebb and flow of the oceans. Water inevitably acquires a symbolic relationship with life and, to a certain extent, with death because, when Rachel takes ship for Santa Marina, she is setting out on a voyage from which there is no return.

The parallelism of the literal and metaphorical voyages in the novel also underlines an implicit tension in the structure of *The Voyage Out*, echoing Woolf's preoccupation with finding adequate means to represent reality through language. According to Frye (1980), *The Voyage Out* starts out as a novel of manners (light and ironic, distanced yet personal) and yet ends up with a metaphysical weight (heavy and serious, committed yet impersonal). Extracts from the opening and closing pages of the novel respectively serve to exemplify this remarkable tonal transformation:

As the streets that lead from the Strand to the Embankment are very narrow, it is better not to walk down them arm-in-arm. If you persist, lawyers' clerks will have to make flying leaps into the mud; young lady typists will have to fidget behind you. In the streets of London where beauty goes unregarded, eccentricity must pay the penalty, and it is better not to be very tall, to wear a long blue cloak, or to beat the air with your left hand (WOOLF, 2001, p. 3).

All that evening the clouds gathered, until they closed entirely over the blue of the sky. They seemed to narrow the space between earth and heaven, so that there was no room for the air to move in freely; and the waves, too, lay flat, and yet

rigid, as if they were restrained. The leaves on the bushes and trees in the garden hung closely together, and the feeling of pressure and restraint was increased by the short chirping sounds which came from birds and insects (WOOLF, 2001, p. 429).

Although it may be argued that this shift in tone represents a tension which the author was unable to resolve satisfactorily, it is nonetheless clear that Virginia Woolf's handling of metaphysical concerns in *The Voyage Out*, foreshadows the formal originality that she was to demonstrate in her later novels.

The tragedy of Woolf's first novel lies in Rachel's incapacity to adapting to the world around her. The novel's principal conflict arises when Rachel comes into contact with different people in Santa Marina. She becomes confused about her identity in this "new world", and as the events unfold, she finds the resultant conflict unbearable. Rachel's death in *The Voyage Out* is open to many interpretations. Virginia Woolf's decision to kill off the protagonist of her first novel certainly warrants analysis, particularly in the light of aspects of the author's personal life, her painstaking method of literary composition, and also of her perception of the difficulty of representing reality in literature. The death of Rachel Vinrace is a clear indication of Virginia Woolf's determination to follow the path of rupture and innovation later on, as one might say, to kill the Angel in the House – the embodiment of the Victorian feminine ideal. This myth, which determined a woman's role as being primarily that of a wife and mother selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband, had its origins in the long narrative poem of the same name published in four sections from 1854 to 1863 by Coventry Patmore (1823-96). The first two sections, *The Betrothed* and *The Espousals*, were an idealised account of Patmore's own wife Emily. In her essay, *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf characterised the ideal as follows:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. [...] in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. [...]. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel (WOOLF, 1942).

As a literary critic and novelist, Woolf always fought against this phantom. In her essays, she defended women's need for financial independence and intellectual freedom since men held the power to bar female creativity. Thus, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (WOOLF, 2004, p. 4).

However, it is perhaps evidence of insufficiently attentive reading to argue that Rachel Vinrace's death is entirely unexpected. The figure of death is present from the very outset of Rachel's sea voyage. So, in fact, from the moment that Rachel opens herself up to the influences of a new world, her tragic end becomes inevitable. She dies mysteriously of a fever, soon after she has declared her love to Hewet. In a sense, then, death is the fulfilment of Rachel and Hewet's love. Frye argues that love and death are linked throughout the course of the novel:

It is clear that love and death are closely related not only by plot evolution but also by an intertwining of imagery and theme. But their relationship is not casual; rather, both Rachel's love and her death are seen in the same terms – both are microcosms of the total thematic pattern of the novel (FRYE, 1980, p. 409).

Throughout the novel Rachel is portrayed as being anachronous and out of step with her world. For Walker (1998), Rachel's incapacity to fit in renders death the only solution that can maintain the novel's literary integrity:

Rachel as an out of time, out of place heroine does not fit into her surroundings emotionally, physically, or intellectually. She is not like the other characters, she feels apart from them and they sense this, she does not communicate well with them, and she has intense aversions to what her contemporaries consider the normal life for a young woman. She is not 'avant garde', but neither is she a character of a previous time. Her early development is suppressed [...], her education is incomplete and based on irrelevancies, and she doesn't have a clear vision of a future that is meaningful. Woolf very systematically places Rachel opposite characters that are in time and in place, and in the end Woolf has no choice but to write Rachel's death because Rachel never finds the time or place where she fits in (WALKER, 1998, p. 1).

Rachel does not fit in with her world, and Virginia Woolf does not give her an opportunity to find a time or a place that are appropriate for her. It is almost as if, with the death of Rachel Vinrace, Virginia Woolf is conscious that the experience of the character has taken her beyond the conventional limits of language, to a realm where her own struggles as a writer to resolve the tension between language and reality could also be resolved. This perhaps serves to explain why it is only when Rachel dies that her fiancé, Terence Hewet, is finally able to encounter the peaceful joy of their perfect union:

An immense feeling of peace came over Terence, so that he had no wish to move or to speak. The terrible torture and unreality of the last days were over, and he had come out now into perfect certainty and peace.

[...] Once he held his breath and listened acutely; she was still breathing; he went on thinking for some time; they seemed to be thinking together; he seemed to be Rachel as well as himself; and then he listened again; no, she had ceased to breathe. So much the better – this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe. It was happiness, it was perfect happiness. They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived. Unconscious whether he thought the words or spoke them aloud, he said, ‘No two people have ever been so happy as we have been. No one has ever loved as we have loved’.

It seemed to him that their complete union and happiness filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely. He had no wish in the world left unfulfilled. They possessed what could never be taken from them (WOOLF, 2001, p. 412).

Death allows both Virginia Woolf and her reader to see beyond the various tensions which have provided both theme and form for the novel. The love between Hewet and Rachel is now able to transcend such conflicts, taking them far beyond the barrier of language.

As the story develops around Rachel Vinrace, the reader accompanies her awakening to the existence of a new world outside her hitherto cloistered life. Simultaneously, the reader also becomes aware of Virginia Woolf's ongoing attempts to overcome the difficulties of expressing human experience through language. The various tensions between the individual and society, between the inner self and the external world, and between the impulses towards social criticism and metaphysical reflection are blended together in the form and themes in the novel's account of the inner and outer voyages of the central character. *The Voyage Out* is a novel structured around dualities and dichotomies. When Virginia Woolf contrasts London and Santa Marina she is constructing a metaphor for the division of the human personality and the impossibility of ever completely knowing another person. In the words of Naremore (1973, p. 31), “having both a civilized exterior of manners and routine, of tea cakes and prime ministers, and a profound, obscured inner life of passion and feeling”, the human being is quite impenetrable. Thus, in *The Voyage Out*, there are always two ways of seeing things: an external world of manners, social roles and political attitudes which is controlled by men, and, on the other hand, a world of primitive feeling and emotion in which individuals, especially women, desire to be united by a natural law.

In her introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel Lorna Sage points out that Virginia Woolf came across the title for her novel quite by chance when she took a sea voyage of

her own to Portugal in 1905 and only discovered on *The Voyage Out* that she should have purchased a return ticket before the trip started. Sage goes on to state that, “the novel of beginning on the world is a rite of passage, an odyssey of sorts. It is where you ‘find your bearings’ as a writer” (WOOLF, 2001, p. 12). It seems reasonable then to argue that, in *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf was embarking not only on a quest to establish herself in the literary world, but also on the restless search which was to occupy her until she took her own life in 1941, the search for an adequate means of representing reality with the inadequate tool of language.

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