

**Ain Shams University
Women's College For Arts,
Science And Education**

**Virginia Woolf: A Novelist Of Transcendence
With Special Reference To The Major Themes In
Her Novels**

A Thesis

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By

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Dedication

To the Spirit of Dr. Salwa Khalil

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List of Abbreviations

- VO ...** *The Voyage Out* . 1915. London: Hogarth Press, 1966.
- ND ...** *Night and Day*. 1919. London: Hogarth Press, 1966.
- MD ...** *Mrs. Dalloway*. 1925. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.
- TTL ...** *To the Lighthouse* . 1927. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.
- TCR ...** *The Common Reader*. Harmondsworth, Middle Sex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1938.
- TM ...** *The Moment and Other Essays*. Ed. Leonard Woolf. London: The Hogarth Press, 1947.
- LOV ...** *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (6 vols.). Eds. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann. London: The Hogarth Press, 1979.
- CE ...** *Virginia Woolf: Collected Essays* (4 vols.) Ed. Leonard Woolf. London: The Hogarth Press, 1980.
- DOV ...** *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (5 vols.). Ed. Anne Olivier Bell London: The Hogarth Press, 1984.

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Synopsis

Virginia Woolf is known as one of the most innovative and influential modern novelists of the early twentieth century. Along with such experimenters as Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, and Lawrence, Virginia Woolf is a prime representative of those novelists who have the courage to break free from tradition, and then to give a new form and a new spiritual awareness to the English novel. Yet, like all geniuses Virginia Woolf represents a problem to those concerned with her work.. There are countless controversial studies of her life and work, trying to discover the 'real' Virginia Woolf. Some critics, e.g. Thakur and Blackstone, see her as mainly a symbolist. Other critics, e.g. Herbert Marder, affirm that she is a feminist. Still others, e.g. Mark Hussey, are of the view that she is a war novelist. To Jane Kane, Virginia Woolf is mystic, but to Elizabeth Abel Virginia Woolf is a psychoanalytical novelist.

This thesis aims at studying Virginia Woolf as a novelist of transcendence both in its phenomenological and metaphysical senses. This thesis also examines the major themes, images and techniques Virginia Woolf uses in her novels in the light of the notion of transcendence. The method of analysis applied depends basically on analytical investigation, to be able to examine the elements of transcendence in the novels of Virginia Woolf.

To achieve these goals, the present thesis is divided into three chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter, Virginia Woolf and Transcendence, is divided into two parts. The first part investigates Virginia Woolf's background, concentrating upon her social and intellectual milieu, and how far they participated in shaping her mind as a novelist of transcendence.

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 and died in 1941. The spirit of that period was one of moral perplexity and uncertainty: old truths in every sphere of life – in religion, in ethics, in politics, in philosophy, in aesthetics ... etc. – were put to the question. Within this atmosphere of moral unease and spiritual gloom, man changed, became rootless, depressed, alienated, spiritually crippled and intellectually passive.

The second part of this chapter is devoted to the analysis of the term transcendence, both in its phenomenological and metaphysical senses. Etymologically, the term 'transcendence' is derived from the Latin verb 'transcendere' ('trans' means "beyond" and 'scendere' means "to climb") and it means "to exist above and independent of material experience or the universe." Thus, dictionaries contribute a metaphysical sense to the term transcendence when they define it as a belief in a higher reality not validated by sense experience or pure reason.

Viewed as a whole, the term "transcendence", in its metaphysical sense, implies a duality – a realm or a world of Here (that which is perceived by the senses) and a realm of There (that which is beyond the senses). In other words, the term 'transcendence', in its metaphysical sense, implies that there is a spiritual reality that transcends our ordinary consciousness and that humanity's highest potential is to achieve an experience of unity with this transcendental reality. Actually, the metaphysical sense of the term transcendence has been established since the primitive modes of thinking, more specifically, since the change from **Totemic Thought** to **Mythic Thought**, then developed by Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and st. Thomas Aquinas. The metaphysical sense of the term transcendence can also be attested to in the Christian thought, in the Islamic tradition, in the Romantic Sublime, and in the Emersonian Transcendentalism.

In its phenomenological sense, transcendence is a process that consists in man's breaking beyond mere self-concern and projecting outwards as a being whose very nature is to share with others for whom one cares and about whom one is concerned. In this process, one identifies new purposes or goals for the sake of which action is to be undertaken. In other words, transcendence, in its phenomenological sense, means going beyond selfishness, remorse, guilt, weakness, pain, evil, rebelliousness, anger, and resentment. It also has the following prerequisites: self-mastery, balance, a sense of connection and belonging to the world we are part of, love, mutual understanding, friendship, self-trust, and action.

The second chapter, Transcendence in practice: thematic analysis, is dedicated to the thematic analysis of four of Virginia Woolf's major novels – *The Voyage Out*,

Night and Day, Mrs. Dalloway, and To the Lighthouse – showing to what extent these themes embody the power of transcendence both in its phenomenological and metaphysical senses.

A thorough examination of *The Voyage Out* reveals that the world which the novel portrays is one in which love, mutual understanding, communication, friendship, harmony and balance have no place. The examination of the novel demonstrates a great deal of the absurd behaviour of the characters, and futility in their relationships. The characters of the novel talk to each other, making random and pointless remarks that are neither related nor showing intimacy.

In this novel, marriage, the holy bond, is not based on either love or even mutual understanding. The worlds in which Ridley Ambrose and his wife, Helen, live are different. Ridley is completely immersed in the world of intellect while Helen is devoted to the world of emotion.

Virginia Woolf's denouncement of the sterile, isolated world in which the pedantic intellectuals indulge is clear in her creation of the characters of John Hirst and Mr. Pepper. Like Mr. Ambrose, both are blind to the world of emotion, sympathy and love, and consequently they miss the spiritual in life.

Rachel Vinrace, the heroine of the novel, begins her life like them. She is self-contained, neither connected with the external world nor with other persons. She knows almost nothing about communication, unity or love. With the absence of these important forces, Rachel finds life aimless and meaningless. However, Rachel's voyage with her aunt, Helen, and her subsequent stay with her aunt and uncle in their house in Santa Marina are a turning-point in her life. Rachel's communication with other people on board the ship, her contact with Richard Dalloway and her involvement in the social activities of English people living in Santa Marina have actually awakened in her the powers of love, freedom, friendship, and communication she has never known or experienced before in her isolation. With the introduction of Terence Hewet into Rachel's life she also acquires the powers of love, mutual understanding, and unity. But unfortunately, she acquires them too late as Rachel dies as soon as she begins to experience the supreme value of love, mutual understanding,

communication and unity – the principles of transcendence in its phenomenological sense. Yet, Rachel's death is a clear message to those who are far from transcendence and discover it too late.

The 'voyage' which Virginia Woolf sets forth in the world of *The Voyage Out* continues in *Night and Day* with the same vessel equipped with the one indispensable weapon of transcendence. Keeping to her own style in *The Voyage Out* Virginia Woolf initiates *Night and Day* by portraying the isolation, the detachment, the loneliness and the sterility in which the characters live. Marriage, which is a sacred relationship aiming at promoting communication, participation and fruition, is depicted at the beginning of the novel as a poor and frustrating relationship and the reason is the absence of mutual understanding and compatibility. Like Helen Ambrose in *The Voyage Out*, Mrs. Hilbery is married to a man who is her opposite in character. Like Mr. Ambrose, Mr. Pepper and John Hirst in *The Voyage Out*, Mr. Hilbery lives wholly in the abstract realm of the intellect which leads to his detachment from the outside world and turns him from a participant in life into a mere observer. Mrs. Hilbery, on the other hand, lives completely in the world of vision, which prevents her from fulfilling the practical duties of life. Thus, the visionary Mrs. Hilbery and her fact-loving husband are incompatible; they are incapable of living happily together.

Dissatisfied with any marital bonds which are not based on compatibility, love and mutual understanding, Virginia Woolf then introduces the characters of Katharine Hilbery and Ralph Denham. Both commit themselves first to loveless engagements (Katharine to Rodney and Ralph to Mary) as an escape from their sense of isolation and alienation; when recognizing how arid such relationships are, they develop self-knowledge and balance, and finally refuse to be engaged or to marry until they feel assured that they have achieved the state of spiritual communion. Then marriage becomes the conventional outward form only.

Virginia Woolf begins *Mrs. Dalloway* by showing the indelible effects the First World War left upon man. Man, as a result of losing his balance, was isolated, alienated, self-centered, egotist, possessive, depressed, and insane. Because of the war, Septimus Smith becomes an emotional and mental wreck. Unable to communicate

with either himself or the outside world, Septimus decides to escape from what he considers a hellish world by committing suicide.

Created in Septimus's image and character, perhaps worse, is Peter Walsh. He is disappointed, selfish, possessive, escapist and a mentally unbalanced character. On the whole, Peter's life is one of defeat and failure. Thwarted in his love to Clarissa, Peter knows no real peace of mind or soul. He tries to escape his agony by travelling to India and working there, but he fails. He makes an attempt to compensate for his lost love through marriage, but he has always been choosing the wrong woman. The result is a character that is mentally not well-adjusted to the demands of life, a character that misses much of the beauties in life, a character overwhelmed with depression.

Sir William Bradshaw, Dr. Holmes, and Miss Kilman are three dehumanizing forces inhabiting the world of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The three characters hide their spiritual cannibalism, i.e. their restless desire to feed upon the souls of others and controlling them under the guise of medical treatment, in the case of Dr. Holmes and Sir Bradshaw, and under the guise of religion, in the case of Doris Kilman.

The portrayal of Septimus Warren, Peter Walsh, Sir William Bradshaw, Miss Kilman and Dr. Holmes is thus meant to give a thorough image of the inability, whether psychologically or intellectually, of these characters to achieve transcendence within the chaotic world in which each character lives as isolated worshipper of his/her false god. In other words, the portrayal of these characters is intended to stress the standpoint that the absence of love, mutual understanding, friendship, self-mastery, communication and the sense of unity leads either to cannibalism or to suicide.

Woolf's satirical depiction of these characters is artistically drawn to show how monstrous, depressing and hateful a life lacking in transcendence is. This devilish world she then purges with her creation of Clarissa Dalloway, a character whose life is based on transcendence. Determined never to bow to any false god or any limitation set up by society, Clarissa Dalloway seeks, throughout the novel, communication, love, unity, freedom, mutual understanding, balance and immortality. On the whole, Clarissa Dalloway deserves to be the protagonist of the novel. She deserves to have the novel named after her, for she is a study of sanity in the midst of the insane chaos of