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Abstract

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Eleanor McNees, Ph.D.

Second Advisor

Adam Rovner

Third Advisor

Christine Sheikh

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“PIECES IN A PATTERN”: VIRGINIA WOOLF AND FAMILY MEMORY

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the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

Kirsten M. Thoming

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Advisor: Eleanor McNees

Author: Kirsten M. Thoming

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INTRODUCTION

I see more distinctly how our lives are pieces in a pattern, and to judge one truly you must consider how this side is squeezed and that indented and a third expanded and none are really isolated. (Woolf, Moments of Being 30)

An interesting world lies between memory and truth, where reality becomes hard to define, where the same set of experiences builds different identities at different points in life. This world is brilliantly and confusingly on display in great memoirs. Memoirs have a distinct narrative rhythm, moving fluidly between past and present. Memoirs contain a unique complexity as well because they attempt to represent a past reality but are rather a narrative reconstruction of that past reality. How can one ever really divorce memories from the intervening experiences? Those intervening experiences and the process of reflecting give context and meaning to past events. The perspective of a sixty-year-old woman is not the same as that of a five-year-old. And it is in this mindset that I pursue the memoir genre through Virginia Woolf's powerfully written and complex memoirs.

The memoir genre is a form of autobiographical writing that focuses on notable events or people encountered in one's life and involves significant contemplation or commentary on the meanings found through such encounters.

While autobiographers usually strive to contain an entire chronological life within the text, memoirs tend to include something more like snapshots: moments that shaped or crafted the life of the author. Modern literary handbooks name memoir as a sub-genre of autobiography,¹ and indeed, the demarcation between autobiography and memoir is sometimes unclear. In his book *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda writes explicitly that he even uses the terms interchangeably, that they “mean more or less the same thing: a book understood by its author, its publisher, and its readers to be a factual account of the author’s life” (Author’s Note). Yagoda goes on to say in his note that opinions vary as to whether memoir or autobiography requires more fact-checking. The concept of memoir as a genre has changed significantly over the last few hundred years, but throughout this thesis, I will maintain a distinction between autobiography and memoir. To be clear, however, memoir is not autobiography, but I will refer to it as a form of autobiographical writing throughout this thesis.

One of the most notable differences between autobiography and memoir is that memoir uses a narrative frame. I use this phrase to mean the way a memoir is delivered; because the form of a memoir usually includes more interaction between past and present than an autobiography, memoirs often involve more scene-setting and internal descriptions. Memoirs usually contain a “greater emphasis on other people or upon events such as war and travel experienced in common with other” (Baldrick). Thus, the memoirist engages

¹ For example, see David Mikics’ quick mention of memoir in his *New Handbook of Literary Terms* (Yale UP, 2007: 41) or the entry for “memoir” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* by Chris Baldrick (Oxford UP, 2008).

with the details in a different way from the autobiographer, attempting to describe the event in a way that conveys the entirety of the event and all those involved, as well as its importance. This is all developed through a frame: a deliberate packaging of the events in a meaningful way. Memoir therefore differs from fiction in that it forces the close association of narrator and author. The narrative element in play – particularly in memoirs of accomplished fiction writers – spins the reality of the memoir into something that can be distorted through the act of remembering and the process of reflection. Memory is itself a tricky mechanism of the mind that tends toward inconstancy through unconscious (or sometimes conscious) revision, gaps, or accidents.

Woolf wrote a number of memoir pieces throughout her life; I will focus on the two longer works. Woolf began the first memoir, “Reminiscences,” in 1907, long before publishing her first novel. “A Sketch of the Past” was the last and longest memoir, written in the winter of Woolf’s life, 1939-1940. The final date in the manuscript is four months before Woolf committed suicide. One of the most captivating facets of Woolf’s memoirs is that she covers the same period of time from two vastly different perspectives, a point which provides a perfect window into the changing character of a memoir. Woolf was a prolific diarist and letter-writer, as well as an accomplished novelist and essayist, so her varied writings also present an interesting opportunity to cross-examine the memoir form in general. The memoirs arrange elements of her professional writing together with the intimate details and voice of her personal writing and

allow for certain confrontations she had been unable to force in her personal writing. For example, some of the events she could barely address in her diaries became the primary focus of her memoirs: “Monday 19 July: At 3 this morning, Georgie and Nessa came to me, & told me that Stella was dead – That is all we have thought of since; & it is impossible to write of” (*Passionate Apprentice* 115). What had previously been too painful to write about becomes less unspeakable with the progress of time and through the buffer of reflection.

The intimacy between writer and subject within a memoir makes for a unique dynamic and reveals much about both. Woolf was particularly fascinated with what could be termed the in-between spaces of life, the spaces that drift between reality and unreality. She saw her job as a memoirist to involve capturing moments, or scenes, and putting them into words. She implies that something about the scene itself commands permanence and creates its own reality, as she relates her view of the “scene making” process in “A Sketch of the Past,” edited by Jeanne Schulkind into the memoir collection *Moments of Being*:²

We are sealed vessels afloat on what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene – for [these moments] would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made of something permanent; that is a proof of their ‘reality.’ (142)

² *Moments of Being* was first published in 1976, but Schulkind revised the text into a second edition in 1985 after a revised manuscript of “A Sketch of the Past” surfaced in the British Library in 1980. All page numbers listed here refer to this second edition of the collection.

Indeed, there is a thin line between life and art, between nonfiction and fiction, and nowhere is this line thinner than within the pages of a memoir. These sketches provide a fascinating view behind the persona of a skilled novelist and give credence to a conjecture that Woolf was obsessed with the writing and rewriting of her own life. Schulkind comments on this pattern of revisiting life events in her introduction to the second edition of *Moments of Being*:

These memoirs also reveal the unusual degree to which Virginia Woolf wove the facts of her life – the people, the incidents, the emotions – into the fabric of her fiction, thus testifying to the firm artistic control she exercised over that material. (11)

Indeed, Woolf's entire life seemed to lie within her artistic scope, and in some ways she became obsessed with the memories of those long since gone: she continued to write versions of her parents and her siblings in various incarnations and settings throughout her life, as detailed in Mark Spilka's 1979 article about grief in Woolf's texts.³ Though Woolf's psychological motives for her repeated subjects are less important for the development of this thesis, the intricate relationships between these stories about her life shed light on different aspects of her experiences as a developing writer. She endured traumatic years of upheaval from 1895 (the death of her mother Julia from influenza) through 1906 (after the deaths of her half-sister Stella in 1897, presumably of an infection; father Leslie in 1904 from cancer; and brother Thoby in 1906 of

³ Spilka, Mark. "The Robber in the Bedroom: Or, The Thief of Love: A Woolfian Grieving in Six Novels and Two Memoirs." *Critical Inquiry* 5.4 (Summer 1979): 663-682.

typhoid fever). This will be highlighted specifically when discussing Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* as a companion to her autobiographical writings.

To provide contrast to Woolf's memoirs, I will consider a memoir written by her father, Leslie Stephen. Stephen was also an accomplished writer and the first editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*. He knew many of the greatest literary and philosophical figures of the nineteenth century, but one of his most compelling pieces was never intended for publication. Called by his children the *Mausoleum Book*, the text began as a letter to his children after the sudden death of their mother; this letter reads much like a memoir and shares a very similar structure, but the piece was meant only for an intimate group. I will use Stephen's *Mausoleum Book* to examine how Woolf's texts respond to one another, as well as to her family history and literary background in order to demonstrate how disparate memoirs can create a shared family memory.

It is also important to note that Vanessa Bell wrote a brief memoir about her sister. The short text was published in 1974, about thirteen years after Bell's death. The memoir paints a cheerful picture of the Stephen children's young lives, before the death of their mother. It is only a few pages and was never widely distributed, although it was reprinted in *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections* by John Henry Stape in 1995. Bell provides one additional voice to the family conversation through a vibrantly written but simple memoir. Though it is a nice companion piece to the other primary texts, Bell's text will

not be discussed extensively in this study because it does not provide sufficient depth or breadth to cross-reference the other texts considered.

In addition to Woolf's two memoirs and that of her father, Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) offers a parallel view of the events covered in the memoirs from a fictional perspective. The novel also provides an interpretation of the events that is at least slightly compromised through the medium of fiction. The novel forces further contrast between Woolf's and Stephen's memoirs to become apparent. By grouping these four works together, one can better understand the rich genre of memoir, while also getting a glimpse of the powerful complexity and narrative intricacies of the Woolf/Stephen family conversation.

CHAPTER 1: MEMOIR THEORY

As a study of memoir necessarily concerns the interplay between narrative and memory, it is necessary to gain a basic understanding of the ways they interact. But to try to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the interactions between these two concepts would be an impossible task. My secondary sources range across a spectrum of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and philosophy in order to develop a picture of how and why these primary texts form a shared history. This thesis will center on research concerning three main concepts in investigating the relationships between Woolf's and Stephen's texts: social memory, truth and nostalgia, and identity.

Before developing the theoretical background for this thesis, I will contextualize the primary works as outlined in the introduction. Although these texts were not written at the same time, nor were necessarily meant to constitute a group narrative, there are valid reasons for treating them as such. In a general sense, these texts may be regarded as a group narrative because they all deal with roughly the same group of experiences within the same family. But beyond the basic subject matter, the texts also share a common genesis. Gérard Genette explores the idea of hypertextuality in his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the*

Second Degree (1982, translated in 1997), and applying his theory to these texts illuminates their interrelationships and gives a more precise vocabulary with which to discuss them. Palimpsest texts are those written on previously used scrolls, which have been erased and cleaned. The imagery of this idea - overlaying one text onto another while retaining traces of the original - operates on a few levels here. Memory itself acts as a palimpsest, as the memory of an event is recorded but revised as it is accessed again in recollection. This concept will be discussed further below. Additionally, the concept of palimpsests presents a platform from which to discuss Woolf's literal revising of her father's and her own texts, as she engages in both imitative and revisionist behavior.

It is important to apply Genette's vocabulary as I will refer to these texts later in light of their contextual relationships. Stephen's *Mausoleum Book* serves as the hypotext, or the original text for present purposes. Of course it may be argued that there is no *original* text, and that all texts derive from and build on their predecessors. Indeed, Stephen is not writing his memoir in a vacuum, devoid of outside influence; rather, his text contains many direct references and allusions to the writings of many accomplished authors with whom he was associated. But Genette himself discredits the value of the unending hypertextuality of literature: "The effect of such an attitude would be to subsume the whole of universal literature under the field of hypertextuality, which would make the study of it somewhat unmanageable" (9). He goes on to suggest that such an approach to intertextuality also places too much emphasis on the

“hermeneutic activity” of the reader. Thus, for the sake of simplicity, I will treat Stephen’s text as an isolated hypotext. Woolf’s memoirs and novel, then, serve as hypertexts, or texts that are derivative of Stephen’s in some aspect. In other words, Woolf’s memoirs owe their existence in some degree to Stephen’s memoir.

Genette details multitudes of ways in which hypertexts may derive from the hypotext, such as parody, sequel, and travesty. The Woolf/Stephen texts exhibit a much more subtle relationship that employs a few of the more indirect relational aspects that Genette discusses, such as transtylization⁴ and revaluation, expansion in some areas, concision in others. Furthermore, Woolf’s memoirs interact with Stephen’s text in slightly different ways: “Reminiscences” is directly imitative, whereas “A Sketch of the Past” breaks with the style of the previous two texts and utilizes a new approach to the memoir form. “A Sketch of the Past” becomes a hypertext again in relation to Woolf’s earlier memoir and *To the Lighthouse*. The texts build on one another in layers; the earlier texts take on additional significance as the later texts invoke their predecessors, either positively or negatively.

Russian philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin drives this concept of intertextuality further with his writing on the dialogism of a text, or the dialogue conducted with outside texts and also within the text itself. The stress remains on the interconnected nature of texts and the voices arranged within those texts. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Bakhtin devotes one essay to a study

⁴ Genette’s term for “a stylistic rewriting, a transposition whose sole function is a change of style” (226).

of discourse within a novel, but his conclusions have broader implications outside of his discussion of dialogue within works of prose. The main concept relevant for my thesis is his model of a novel as a system of intersecting “languages:” “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262). The “diversity of individual voices” is what creates the whole language of the novel. In the case of memoir, the individual voices combine to form the reconstructed past.

Bakhtin expands the idea within the larger concept of heteroglossia, or multi-linguaged social systems. The term is applied particularly in the context of a multiplicity of dialects within a single national language, but the underlying idea complements any study of multi-vocal texts. Bakhtin describes the forces at work in discourse: “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (272). Thus, every time a thought is spoken, it is in competition and tension with the other surrounding “languages.” Forces within the language stretch it outward, moving in new directions and taking on new meanings, while simultaneous outside forces of other languages and intentions react and push back. The point here is that nothing is neutral, and that language is a volatile and dynamic medium. Language becomes owned by the speaker, and utterances are deliberate and “shot through with intentions and accents:” “The word in language is half

someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (293). Bakhtin's theory puts emphasis on the interrelationships of language, on the fact that spoken or written words are a product of the writer and the reader or hearer, and that meaning comes from the intersections of the language intentions of all involved.

Bakhtin's and Genette's theories open up a path to discuss these texts, and secondary research from various other disciplines will aid in exploring the three concepts mentioned above as related to these texts. Though the literary ties between the primary texts are important, additional fields of research such as psychology and philosophy will lead to further insights into these textual relationships. In taking a broad approach to the concept of intertextuality, I will be able to address the questions of audience and voice, among others, in looking at how these texts communicate with one another.

Social Memory

Central to my theoretical framework is the idea that autobiographical writing and acts of autobiographical memory are inherently shared events. The father of modern notions of collective memory is held by many modern sociologists to be the 20th-century French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. His theories, presented in *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (published in French in 1952) and *The Collective Memory* (published in 1980),

focus on the sociological aspects of memory, and in particular, on why memories behave the way they do: “But if we examine a little more closely how we recollect things, we will surely realize that the greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us” (*On Collective Memory* 38). Those with whom one associates most closely are those who will have the strongest impact on what forms memories and invites recollections. In fact, Halbwachs writes that it is in groups that memory is both created and accessed (38).

Through his early development of the concept of collective memory, Halbwachs lays the groundwork of memory as a social function. Even more important for my study is his interest in the “combination of individual recollections” that creates “the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past” (40). This concept is important because it highlights the way the collaborative image is constructed, by combining multiple perspectives into one shared reflection. Thus, the final image becomes the blending of all individual reflections on that shared past. By looking at the way the Woolf/Stephen texts interact thematically and stylistically, one can find a family reconstruction – an image, so to speak – of their shared past.

These socio-cultural aspects of memory have become more critically prevalent in the past decades since Halbwachs’ publications emerged in the first half of the 20th century (though most of his writings did not surface in English translations until the 1980s and 1990s). Sociologists became increasingly

interested in the impact of other people on one's own memory. Janelle Wilson explains this in defending a sociological interest in the idea of collective memory: "Sociologists [studying the effect of] the social world on individual memory find the concept of collective memory highly relevant. The suggestion is that it is impossible to regard the individual and his or her society as strictly separate" (Wilson 39). In a literal sense, this is absolutely true as private recollections remain exactly that and do not enter into the framework of analyzing memory as revealed through autobiographical writing. But placing these texts in direct contact with the shared group texts allows for a narrower focus on the social or shared elements, while investigating the contextual relationships more deliberately. The writings can work as a conversation across time to conceive a mutual – or at least mutually intelligible – understanding of shared experiences. Two particular articles will enhance this study by introducing a more specific schema for discussing social memory.

Psychologists William Hirst and David Manier, who have researched both neurological and socio-cultural memory behaviors, expand upon the idea of social memory as a conversation in their article "Remembering as Communication: A Family Recounts Its Past" (1996), in which they analyze the communicative roles taken on by a particular family when "jointly reconstructing a shared past experience" (272). They interviewed a family of four individually and then collectively to review the differences in their public and private discourses. The authors treated the family as a case study for

discovering ways in which private and public acts of recollection differ. In introducing their hypothesis regarding the social quality of memory, they state:

We cannot divorce the act of remembering from the act of communicating, nor can we treat an autobiographical memory as something distinct from the discourse itself. Recollections arise not from the depths of a storehouse in the head, but from the desire to communicate with others about the personal past (271).

Using Hirst's and Manier's schema allows for a direct analysis of the textual interaction with a distinct conversational vocabulary. Though the memoirs may well be treated as individual and ultimately private musings, they may also be addressed in concert with one another, treating them as a conversation or as acts of shared remembering. This communicative paradigm allows and even encourages a deeper analysis of the *who* and *why* of discourse, though the individual writings may not be specifically directed at one another.

Hirst's and Manier's thesis centers around the ways conversational roles (narrator, monitor, and mentor) change between shared and unshared remembering. The key behind applying this schema to the three memoirs is in the *intention* of the writer, as Bakhtin would use the term. Each memoir is written in response to a different set of circumstances to fill an individually perceived void, but they are in conversation with the other voices and texts. The narrative roles provide a framework for explicating those intentions relative to one another in a more easily quantifiable manner. Most of the discussion about how the primary texts fill these individual roles will occur in the next chapter, but I will introduce them here. The role of narrator is the most active involved

participant in the conversation, directing much of what is shared and controlling the tone and mood of the discourse. In terms of Genette's work, the narrator acts as the hypotext in multi-text situation, as with these memoirs; thus, in this case, Stephen's *Mausoleum Book* fills the narrator role as the text to which the others respond.

The mentor provides indirect narrative in the form of feedback to the narrative shared by the rest of the group; a clear mentor relationship is seen when a parent helps his child remember a story rather than telling it himself (Hirst and Manier 272). Mentors usually ask clarifying and probing questions rather than engaging in direct narrative behavior. Because the mentor's job is to clarify but also to reinforce, "Reminiscences" best fits this role. The style and content of Stephen's text and Woolf's first memoir are very similar, and those similarities serve to build upon the earlier text rather than redirect its focus. The final role is that of the monitor, who evaluates the accuracy and completeness of what is shared by adding commentary, additional details, or correction to the narration. Because "Sketch of the Past" contains the most revision to the previous memoirs and is also the most stylistically distinct, the latest memoir of the three best fits the role of monitor, evaluating and commenting upon the previous two texts while redirecting the focus of the family narrative.

These roles "provide for each participant a function and place vis à vis other participants" (272). This returns the focus to the idea of framing, as these narrative roles are more a reflection of the way the writer sees his or her position

relative to the other voices in the background (the heteroglossia). As psychologist John Shotter writes, the “framing [of memory] is *social*, designed for the *sharing* of memory within a culture rather than simply to ensure individual storage” (Bruner 56). Thus, not only is the re-telling of life stories an act of communication, but even the way memories are framed belies communicative intent. As Jerome Bruner, a noted scholar in the field of psychology, goes on to discuss in the context of his own experience with families’ nostalgic conversations, “Obviously, ‘the-story-of-a-life’ as told to a particular person is in some deep sense a joint product of the teller and the told” (124). Contained within this statement is the idea that not only can the various texts be viewed as conversations with one another, but they may also be observed on another level as a conversation with anyone who reads them, again invoking Bakhtin’s emphasis on the tension and flux of voices within and without the text. Though only *To the Lighthouse* was originally intended for mass publication, the other pieces were committed to paper in an effort to convey a particular message to their specific audiences. This further emphasizes the important responsibility that audience has upon the final result, driving what is shared and how it is conveyed.

Memory Revision and Identity

My study of the Woolf/Stephen texts will expand on the idea that autobiographical writing – in this case, memoir – can be viewed in a dialogic

manner, or, at the very least, they can be understood through some of the same analytical processes as discourse. They then act as crossroads of meaning between the parties involved, but the remaining question naturally becomes *how* they create meaning. Jerome Bruner discusses this in an article he co-wrote with his colleague Carol Fleischer Feldman. In their article, Bruner and Feldman discuss the idea of group narrative specifically in the context of narrative development or progression over time and the role that group narrative plays in constructing identity. While Bruner and Feldman deal particularly with interactions within New York theater groups as their subject, the theory they develop holds true, perhaps even more directly, in a family dynamic.

Since autobiographical writing is a self-conscious and, in many ways, a self-defining act, the memory is always relative to the current self. In other words, as the self develops and evolves through the passing of time, so too do the autobiographical narratives that self produces. This evolution is mutually sustaining and has particular importance for my argument, since the passage of time is a significant theme throughout Woolf's writings; she calls attention to it throughout "A Sketch of the Past" and *To the Lighthouse*, as I will show in the next two chapters.

Bruner and Feldman further suggest:

Not only is history being rewritten, but the historian is also being transformed by the very process of doing so. For the rewritten history, as it were, changes the perspective of the historian who wrote it. In like manner, the self who constructs the past is changed by the outcome of its own construction. (292)

Part of the creation of meaning comes then from the process of writing and rewriting that the historian goes through. The process changes what is remembered and how it is remembered as it enters into a narrative frame to be relayed to another. One can easily see this pattern in his or her own memories, where certain details become enlarged or expanded in scope or in importance as one reflects upon the experiences that accumulate in a life story. Every time an event is revisited, the possibility exists that the context will change as a result of the intervening experiences. Woolf wrote about the same period multiple times and in varied contexts, so this concept is clearly on display throughout these primary works.

Bruner's and Feldman's main goal is to show how autobiographies of a mini-culture necessarily grow together as the individual members frame "private experiences (including experience of the self)...meaningfully into a public and communicable form" (293). This idea demonstrates an important aspect of social memory: the interconnectedness of the individual narratives that form the group. Essentially, each member of an intimate group – "the proximal group on which one's cultural existence depends" (294) – frames his or her individual narrative in a way that allows the other members of the group to construe the same or similar meanings. The identity of the group ebbs and flows as the individuals evolve as well, while narratives are being restructured and reexamined, manipulated ever so gently to fall in line with or separate from the group

identity. Bruner's and Feldman's research aids in extrapolating Bakhtin's concept of centripetal and centrifugal tension within a text.

Truth in Recollection

What can be seen starting to emerge from this fluidity of social memory includes an element of nostalgia. As Wilson quotes from writer and theorist Svetlana Boym: "Nostalgia remains an intermediary between collective and individual memory. Collective memory can be seen as a playground, not a graveyard of multiple individual recollections" (Wilson 38). Indeed, this explains elements of what may be found in multiple autobiographical accounts from the same family. They interact with each other as they deal with the same topics and events in each writer's own way. Thus one's idea of truth becomes highly relative, particularly when dealing with the inconstant medium of memory. Two people's recollections of the same event will never exactly mirror one another. Similarly, the same individual's recollections change at different times. And a recollection can never be the same as perceptions occurring while the event is happening. As more experiences intervene between the present and that singular past event, the memory changes character and evolves as the individual does. Writing teacher Maureen Murdock notes:

We go back in time and see, smell, taste, feel or hear a particular scene, and we begin to appreciate the richness and idiosyncrasy of our unique experience. But because these events are not happening in present time, we have to use our imagination to reclaim them. So we can never separate the remembered event from our imagination: they stick together. (12)

Her use of the word “reclaim” further emphasizes the interaction between writer and memory. A memory, according to Murdock, is re-imagined into something meaningful in the present. That memory’s truth or meaning for the individual moves forward in time as he or she does.

Aside from sociological and psychological perspectives on recollection, the field of philosophy presents additional ideas about the nature and truth of recollection. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s interest in hermeneutics led him to write about memory and its subjective nature in a large volume late in his career – *Memory, History, Forgetting* – as he struggled with questions raised from his earlier publications (*Time and Narrative* and *History and Truth*). Though Ricoeur’s theories are primarily concerned with representations of history, they can aid in mapping the perspective of the historian, or the memoirist in this case. First, it is important to dissect what is meant by the vague word “truth” as developed in Ricoeur’s work. David Pellauer, one of the foremost scholars on Ricoeur’s philosophical models, has translated a number of Ricoeur’s works into English, and he summarizes the concept of truth as used in *Memory, History, Forgetting*: “The kind of truth involved here depends as much on the idea of *veracity* as on that of a correspondence between what is remembered and what actually happened in the past” (Pellauer 110). The elements of truth are two-fold: accuracy is important, but so too is the relationship between the present memory and the past event. Of particular

importance is the idea of a “correspondence” between the past event and the memory. Again, this suggests a kind of dialogue.

The truth then, according to Ricoeur, occurs in the conversation between the historian – or the memoirist – and the event. But one must be careful about the accuracy one ascribes to the details in that conversation:

A vigilant epistemology will guard here against the illusion that what we call a fact coincides with what really happened, or with the living memory of eyewitness, as if the facts lay sleeping in the documents until the historians extracted them. (Ricoeur, *MHF* 178)

In other words, the “facts” do not remain untouched until revisited, and the belief, however conscious or unconscious it may be, that events captured in memory may be pure or unchanged is, as Ricoeur says, an illusion. This is particularly true in a situation like the writing of a memoir, which is quite different from attempting to recreate historical fact without bias. With memoir writing, events may be placed in conjunction with ideas or other events which may color the memory differently than if it were narrated in another way. Again, this invokes Bruner’s idea of the way a memory is framed, and how that framing process affects what is remembered as a result. The relativity of the accuracy of facts must be appreciated as the facts are related at different points in these narratives. This does not suggest that Woolf’s facts change wildly over the course of her narratives, or that her facts differ significantly from her father’s, but the variations in emphasis are essential to deciphering this multi-faceted conversation. Vanessa Bell addresses this concept in her own memoir about

Woolf, writing: “We were all so near in age that I cannot be very sure that many of my memories have any sort of truth” (3). Bell here introduces the idea that the interconnected nature of their lives may interfere with the accuracy of each individual’s reflections.

Halbwachs also addresses the relativity and accuracy of memory in his discussion of “reconstructions” of our past experiences:

We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated.” But he goes on to say that “they are not intact” like a fossil that easily permits verifiable and recognizable reconstruction.
(47)

The word “reconstruction” brings to mind the idea of taking apart and building again the connections between the event and the version of the self that lived or witnessed it. Just as the interactions between members in a group cause meanings to shift, so the internal experiences of the writer allow this reconstructing of the past rather than accessing a preserved version of life as it once was.

The complex theories surrounding memory and autobiography are far more intricate than present space allows for consideration, but with the groundwork prepared for further discussion of the primary works, these interwoven ideas can be further developed through analysis of specific examples to explore how well memoir captures the interaction between memory and narrative. Furthermore, Stephen’s and Woolf’s texts will demonstrate the intricate balancing act of identity, family, and memory.

CHAPTER 2: FAMILY MEMOIRS

The memoir genre holds a somewhat contentious place in literary circles and in the world at-large. More often than not, it tends to be written off as self-indulgent or overly sentimental;⁵ Virginia Woolf herself says that “though I read so many [memoirs], so many are failures” (*Moments of Being* 65). Memoirs have also sometimes been scrutinized for accuracy and criticized for being too fictitious, with some fairly recent and highly publicized controversies about what constitutes accuracy in a memoir.⁶ But memoir presents a challenge through the added variable of narrative voice. Because memoir is usually narrower in scope than autobiography, more focused on specific events and relationships rather than the entire life story, the interaction between author and memory is usually framed much more deliberately than in traditional autobiography in order to create an image for the reader. That framing, or scene-setting provided by the memoirist for the reader, allows room for a narrative tone that is not typically prevalent in nonfiction. There is also a distinctly different audience for memoir than for other texts, particularly for Woolf’s and Stephen’s memoirs. *Mausoleum Book* is written to the Duckworth and Stephen

⁵ See “A Brief History of Memoir-Bashing” by Ben Yagoda, posted on 30 Mar 2009 in Slate Magazine (www.slate.com).

⁶ For example, *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, published in 2003. See “The Awful Untruth” by Sheelah Kolhatkar in the *New York Observer* (23 Jan 2006, pg. 1) for more on the controversy surrounding Frey’s memoir.

children, while “Reminiscences” is directed at Woolf’s nephew, Julian Bell. The audience of “A Sketch of the Past” is a little more ambiguous, but it appears to be primarily Woolf and her husband. The element of framing also allows for a little more fluidity between the events depicted and the author. Murdock says, “The job of writing memoir is to find one’s truth, not to determine the accuracy of what happened” (12). The truth of a memoir for Murdock is more concerned with the experience of and meaning for the memoirist than the actual facts of the past.

The three primary texts – “Reminiscences,” “A Sketch of the Past,” and *Mausoleum Book* – manage to sidestep some of the normal pitfalls of memoir to create lively and interesting literary pieces that have much to offer aside from their autobiographical pretenses. A comparison of the two memoirs written by Virginia Woolf – “Reminiscences” (1907) and “A Sketch of the Past” (1939) – will allow for a better understanding of the *Mausoleum Book* by Leslie Stephen through an analysis of contrasts. I will use William Hirst’s and David Manier’s (1996) theory of conversational remembering and narrative roles in the context of Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and heteroglossia to show how the three texts combine to form a conversation about a shared history through the course of the narrative process.

Before moving to the individual memoirs themselves, revisiting in further detail the research of Hirst and Manier will be helpful in composing a fuller picture of the pieces both individually and collectively. According to Hirst and

Manier, family remembering and conversing involves three main roles as explained in the previous chapter: narrator, mentor, and monitor. These sociological terms can be seen as a way of concretely applying Bakhtin's dialogism to these memoirs. Each role – each memoir – has a language of its own, fraught an awareness of and responses to the voices of others. Bakhtin writes: “The object [or text] is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which [the writer's] voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice” (278). The real benefit of looking at these texts in concert with one another, according to Bakhtin, is that the fine distinctions of voice and style can be appreciated. When an “object” is removed from its heteroglot background, “artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived” (278). It is through identifying the contextual relationships of these texts that their real value surfaces.

For Hirst and Manier, the main focus of analysis was to “identify the roles adopted in group efforts at reconstruction of the past and specify how roles can shape a recounting,” specifically noting the contrast between the story one tells in isolation and the group recounting (272). These roles fluctuate within each narrative discussed here, but in general, as Hirst and Manier found, the roles are rather static; the only missing piece in this more literary application is the control sample, or corresponding narratives from each participant told in isolation. While the *Mausoleum Book* was written before the other works, Woolf was one of its intended recipients, and so none of the pieces can really be

isolated from the rest of the family conversation in this case. The *Mausoleum Book* acts most directly as the narrator or control text, to which Woolf's texts respond as mentor and monitor ("Reminiscences" and "A Sketch of the Past," respectively). Further discussion of each memoir's function relative to these narrative roles will be conducted throughout.

In order better to contrast Woolf's two memoirs, it is important to place them in the context of the narrator text, provided by Sir Leslie Stephen. Stephen was a well-known writer and intellectual, who spent time with most of the notable literary figures of the 19th century. Some of his own life is captured in biographies he wrote about others, particularly that of his brother, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, but his first major autobiographical contribution (of two total) was a letter written to Julia's children (George, Stella, and Gerald from her first marriage, and Thoby, Vanessa, Virginia, and Adrian from her marriage to Stephen). His express purpose in writing the piece was to get as much written about her as quickly as possible after her death so that her children would have a record of what she was like and as a means of purging some grief. As a staunch agnostic, Stephen was "denied the traditional Christian consolations," but he "derived much strength and comfort from the compilation of his story" (*Mausoleum Book* x). He painstakingly edited the piece a few months later to add further notes and to verify dates according to a separate calendar project he completed where he pulled data from letters and journals.

In light of Hirst's and Manier's schema of narrative roles, the *Mausoleum Book* takes on the role of narrator. In a literal sense, Stephen's was the first text composed, so his is the piece to which Woolf responds in her memoirs. As the first of the three written, it is naturally the least interactive with the other texts, but it still has much indirect influence on what is shared in the other two narratives. Though all three texts convey a narrated series of events, Stephen's text seems to be the most straightforward in terms of structural framing. He even writes at the beginning of the text: "I am so much of a professional author that I fear that what I am about to say may have the appearance of being meant rather for a book than for a letter" (3). His experience as a biographer, contrasted with his daughter's work in fiction and essay, results in a different tone in which he focuses on the timeline, moving from family ancestry to the present circumstances in a relatively linear fashion. Thus, the *Mausoleum Book* best fits the role of narrator as described by Hirst and Manier.

The writings begin with Stephen's own life and first wife, Minny Thackeray Stephen. He introduces this aside by writing: "I have no intention of writing an autobiography except in [an] incidental way" (4), assuring his children that he will only share about himself those details necessary for understanding their mother. He writes about Julia's family and her first marriage to Herbert Duckworth, before describing their own courtship and marriage. After Stephen writes about her death, the piece evolves into a journal including a somber catalog of Stephen's deceased friends and acquaintances, a fact that

prompted his children to call it somewhat facetiously the *Mausoleum Book*. The tone is more detached than Woolf's memoirs, surely owing to Stephen's experience as a formal biographer, but he also manages to convey a sense of intimacy, largely because of his subject matter. He introduces his letter in this way: "I am writing to you personally, my beloved children – for you are all beloved children to me – and I want simply to talk to you about your mother" (3). His affection for his wife is evident throughout, a fact that instills a sweet melancholic note into the piece. Alan Bell nicely captures this juxtaposition between the scholarly tone and intimate subject matter in his article about Stephen in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*:

Even in the depths of his sorrow he was methodical, working up documentary evidence from letters into a dated sequence around which he could build his own memories. The grief shows itself, as was intended, in many unbridled passages, but these gain from being grafted onto a well-crafted essay prepared by an experienced biographer. (Bell)

Though the emotion is present, Stephen's more "methodical" approach to the structure of his subject matter presents a more direct and uncomplicated tone than either of his daughter's memoirs. Whereas Woolf's memoirs – particularly "A Sketch of the Past" – are delivered through a deliberate memoir frame, Stephen's narrative tends to proceed as the events themselves proceed with little or no interference from the author. His text continues more as a traditional biography than the forms of his daughter's memoirs.

For this study, the question of audience is critical to understanding how these texts communicate with one another and for what purpose they were

crafted, and thus the relative audiences of the memoirs demand certain considerations. The subtle differences in narration sometimes highlight a greater or lesser intimacy in tone and subject matter. The audiences of the three memoirs and the novel vary, so it is necessary to look specifically at how Stephen's intended audience affects his narrative style. As already mentioned, his audience was his children, but that detail drives much about the character of the memoir. Significantly, the title itself was bestowed by the audience rather than the author. And Stephen wanted to maintain the intimacy of the small group; he gives specific instructions not to publish the memoir or even to share it outside the family. He writes: "What I shall say, therefore, is absolutely confidential between you and me. I mean to speak freely of things which are not only confidential now but which must always continue to be confidential" (*Mausoleum Book 3*). His wish for this incidental memoir to remain private is tempered somewhat by the allowance he makes for his children to do whatever they find necessary after his death. For decades, the notebook in which these writings appeared stayed exclusively within the family's possession, but it was eventually acquired by the British Library and published in 1977 by the Oxford University Press.⁷ The material itself was used by F. W. Maitland when writing Stephen's own biography (*Mausoleum Book*, Preface).

His chosen audience directs the piece in another way, as Stephen moves from describing his late wife's remarkable qualities to apologizing for and

⁷ The preface does not name the party that sold the notebook to the British Museum, from which institution it moved to the British Library.

explaining his own behavior.⁸ He seems to feel responsible for Julia's death to some degree, and he works to assure his children that he did, in fact, love their mother. He is intensely private at times, as when disclosing his mild jealousy of Julia's happiness with her first husband; he writes of the letters between Duckworth and Julia: "There was a touch of pain – I cannot deny it – in the clear consciousness which they produced that my darling Julia had owed her purest happiness to another man" (36). He also spends considerable time discussing his own failings as a husband while comparing Julia to his own personal saint. He writes: "I was always by Julia, tall, wrapt in gloom, appealing for pity, and 'dazzling' her by my 'vast intellect'" (65). These details reinforce and substantiate his plea for confidentiality.

His audience also determines the content of the piece. Like Woolf's early memoir, the *Mausoleum Book* contains a portrait of the combined experiences of the Stephen family. For example, the detail he spends describing his first wife, Minny, suggests that he views their lives – Minny, Herbert, Julia, and the children – as very much connected. Stephen's memoir is in itself a conversation of experiences shared by the family as a whole, a manifestation that their family was an interconnected system of language and experience. Woolf phrases an observation in one of her memoirs about her childhood home: "The place seemed tangled and matted with emotion...It seemed as if the house and the family which had lived in it, thrown together as they were by so many deaths, so

⁸ One of his models was undoubtedly Thomas Carlyle's *Reminiscences*, written after the death of his wife, Jane. Carlyle was a friend and one of Stephen's first biographical subjects for *The Dictionary of National Biography*.

many emotions, so many traditions, must endure forever” (*Moments of Being* 183). The way Stephen records his feelings about the family and their interactions appears to contribute a great deal of inspiration to Woolf as she begins writing her novels, and one may see the beginnings of the Woolf/Stephen conversation begin to take form.

Continuing with Hirst’s and Manier’s schema, I will move now from Stephen’s memoir to Woolf’s texts. Woolf’s texts – the palimpsest texts – fill the roles of mentor and monitor as they revise and build on Stephen’s original text. Woolf began her first memoir, “Reminiscences,” in 1907 – eight years before she published her first novel and shortly after the death of her father in 1904 and brother Thoby in 1906. It was conceived as a biographical piece about her sister Vanessa to be addressed to Vanessa’s son, Julian, though it reads more as a joint memoir than a biography of Vanessa. The memoir covers the span from when the children were young until the period just after their half-sister, Stella, died suddenly after only three months of marriage in 1897.

Perhaps because it mirrors the *Mausoleum Book* so closely, “Reminiscences” seems to take on the narrative role of mentor. Though this assignment presents an anachronistic perspective since the mentor usually indirectly helps the creation of the narrative, the role of mentor is slightly more ambiguous than the other two roles in Hirst’s and Manier’s paradigm. The mentor’s function is to encourage and prompt the narrator to tell the story, but the mentor contributes very little directly to the group narrative. Because these

texts were not written simultaneously, an active mentoring role is difficult to assign, but the role fits the best here. Though written after the hypotext, “Reminiscences” does little to correct or censor Stephen’s narrative. It introduces additional perspectives and details, but it does little else to propel the autobiographical conversation in a new direction, so it seems to correlate and strengthen what Stephen had already written. Woolf’s intention with the text seems to be directly imitative in Genette’s sense of literature in the second degree, perhaps attempting to revive Stephen’s voice with her own reconstruction of his memoir.

The mentor/narrator relationship can best be seen in the stylistic similarities of the two texts. It has been noted by critics that the *Mausoleum Book* and “Reminiscences” are rather similar in style. Christopher Dahl has written an excellent essay (1983) placing Woolf in the context of her autobiographical heritage, and he details many specific ways that Woolf seems to emulate her father at this early stage. In summary, he states: “The mode and style of ‘Reminiscences’ are shaped in many other places by the precedent of the *Mausoleum Book*. The similarities are striking” (181). Dahl implies in his article that Woolf’s piece is a kind of retelling of the *Mausoleum Book*.

One of the most important similarities they share is that of the audience. Woolf seems to follow Stephen’s example directly in the structuring her memoir as a letter addressed to a child. Both memoirs are written from a second person perspective to members of the family. Schulkind comments in an editor’s note

that Woolf is following directly in the footsteps of her grandfather and father by “addressing the memoir to the next generation and in broadening her subject to include the Stephen family so that no meaningful distinction can be made here between biography (of Vanessa) and autobiography” (*Moments of Being* 26). She goes on to say that it was somewhat of a family tradition to write such a memoir in such a manner. The context from which they speak (addressing the next generation) and the way they frame their life stories in terms of the entire family maintains a similar thread throughout both pieces.

In his 2003 essay about Woolf’s memoirs, Alex Zwerdling comments on Woolf’s active awareness of her reader: “Woolf always had an acute sense of her reader’s shaping power: ‘To know whom to write for is to know how to write [...and] in a very subtle and insidious way’ the audience becomes ‘the instigator and inspirer of what is written’” (173). This idea from Woolf’s 1924 essay “The Patron and the Crocus” shows the importance audience had for her as a writer in general, but it also shows the tremendous influence her family had on her, as all the pieces to be discussed are centered on and sometimes directly aimed at her closest family members. The audience is important in every aspect of writing but especially for writing deemed “private,” as it directly changes the character of what is shared or withheld. Hirst and Manier comment upon the overwhelming power of the audience: “whoever the audience is, the private speech is responsive to an audience, and the structure and content of the speech changes as the audience changes” (287). In the case of this early memoir, the audience

ultimately consists of Woolf's closest sibling, a new in-law, and an un-met nephew.

Interesting details become more vivid when one looks for audience-specific elements. Indeed, "Reminiscences" carries a simple narrative quality, quite appropriate for writing to a child, as Julian was not even born when she began the piece. Woolf is adoring of her sister and mother, and spends much of the thirty pages expounding upon their virtues. About Julia Stephen, she writes: "For you must conceive that she was not only the most beautiful of women as her portraits will tell you, but also one of the most distinct" (*Moments of Being* 32). She then proceeds to highlight her mother's tragic, selfless life, her "wisdom and temperance, delighting, rejoicing in the exercise of her own gifts" (33). Indeed, the work seems to center on the quick succession of maternal figures through the Stephen household, producing something of a matriarchal snapshot for Vanessa's children, who would never know their grandmother or their Aunt Stella.

And though Woolf's treatment of her father is not exactly stable throughout the narrative, she tends to temper her criticism of him, even though they had a volatile relationship. When she does criticize him, she generally softens her statements later or makes excuses for his demanding and sometimes irrational behavior after her mother's death. In passages detailing the hardships after Stella's death, Woolf writes: "We made him the type of all that we hated in our lives." But she counters her own statement in the next sentence: "We were

bitter, harsh, and to a great extent, unjust,” blaming instead the situation, in which “death spoilt what should have been so fair” (56).

Furthermore, her language echoes the tone of a storyteller that is quite different from the voice she takes in her novels and essays, or even in her later memoirs. She fills in descriptive and emotive details for her characters, and though she does not spend much time describing settings, she does give roundness to the central figures of the text. She heightens the storybook quality by her repetitive use of the idea of “Fate” and the dramatic, incredulous tenor running through her descriptions. For example, with respect to Stella’s courtship with Jack Hills, she rhapsodizes about their love, as if to further the dramatic effect of Stella’s sudden death:

The exquisite tremor of life was once more alight in Stella; her eye shone, her pale cheeks glowed constantly with a faint rose. She laughed and had her tender jokes. Sometimes a fear came over her, possessed her; she had had her life; but then there was Jack to reason her out of her alarms, to kiss her, and show her a sane future. (*Moments of Being* 50)

And then in contrast after Stella’s death, she writes: “[Jack] had lost infinitely more than anyone could calculate; his sorrow seemed to stretch over years to come, withering them and to cast a bitter light on his past” (53). The events are, without a doubt, tragic. But her narrative voice seems to glory in the tragedy, or at least in the irony of the highs and lows, which sometimes produces within the text a sense of emotional exaggeration. This can be seen as an example of Woolf exercising her role as mentor, filling in details that her father may have excluded, embellishing his account with details that he may not have noticed in

his own grief. In this particular example, Stephen would not have been as likely to be as affected by the euphoria of young love or its tragic end as his young daughter. As a mentor would prompt the narrator with specific reminders and questions to expand the story, so too does Woolf interact with her father's memoir and add her unique perspective to the conversation.

Woolf creates some distance between herself and the subjects about whom she is writing by addressing them from her nephew's perspective: "your grandmother" and "your mother" rather than treating them personally; this effectively detaches the writer from her subject, while still keeping the family structure in the reader's mind. Woolf seems to use a narrator/audience model rather than the more intimate speech one would find in strictly personal writings, such as a diary or even a personal letter. This creates further distance between author and audience.

And even though this piece is called a memoir, a large number of Woolf's personal statements or memories are attributed to the whole group of young Stephens – Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby, and Adrian. To a degree, Woolf's childhood memoir exists literally as a collective memoir. Her experiences are shared with them, and aside from a few passages where she focuses more on her own feelings or observations, much of the memoir consists of stories about the rest of the family. Alex Zwerdling attributes much more sinister and intentional purposes to Woolf's collective framing, calling Vanessa's husband Clive "a virtual unknown, a potential threat, and a powerful rival for Vanessa's

affection,” and naming the memoir a form of indoctrination on “the lore of the Stephen sect” (173). But Woolf herself reasons about the collective nature of the narrative, which seems more in keeping with the tone of the piece: “Our lives are pieces in a pattern and to judge one truly you must consider how this one is squeezed and that indented and a third expanded and none are really isolated” (*Moments of Being* 30). She remarks within the memoir on the way the members of her intimate group affect one another and change the outcome of the whole group together. In this context, the group framing of collective life stories comes as a by-product of telling one’s own story.

One of the characteristic elements of memoir is the presence of metanarrative: the reflecting self enters the narrative scene to remark on the distance between the present and the past or the act of remembering. “Reminiscences” contains very little metanarrative, making it feel more self-contained and isolated from outside events. The piece contains few authorial commentaries, and the narrative voice itself is limited to the reflective Woolf within the text. One of the few examples where Woolf inserts herself as author into the narrative occurs early on, as she addresses young Julian with a lamentation that he would never be able to appreciate fully his grandmother’s vitality: “It has often occurred to me to regret that no one ever wrote down her sayings and vivid ways of speech since she had the gift of turning words in a manner peculiar to her, rubbing her hands swiftly, or raising them in gesticulation as she spoke” (*Moments of Being* 36). This is one of few examples

of the authorial Woolf reflecting on the intervening years, noting the passing of time and the existence of a reality outside the memoir. To contrast, she reflects after Stella's death: "There was pain in all our circumstances, or a dull discomfort, a kind of restlessness and aimlessness which was even worse" (*Moments of Being* 55). She attributes a state of being to the Stephen family at the time of Stella's death without reflecting or making commentary on it. Again, Woolf follows her father's example in constructing a straightforward and relatively uncomplicated narrative.

In contrast, Woolf's later piece, "A Sketch of the Past" (hereafter noted as "A Sketch") pays attention less to a strict chronology in favoring a greater degree of thematic coherence. As Schulkind explains in the editor's note to the second edition of *Moments of Being*, this piece was begun in 1939 when Woolf was nearly sixty years old (61). It is compiled from a collection of journal-like entries, most of which are date-stamped. The manuscripts were slightly revised and edited by both Woolf and her husband. A more extensive revision was discovered in 1980, which prompted the second edition of the memoir collection. This implies that Woolf did intend to move forward with publication at some point, though her revisions were obviously incomplete (*Moments of Being* Preface to the Second Edition). The last entry of "A Sketch" is dated November 17, 1940, just a few months before Woolf's death. Thirty-two years passed between the first memoir and the second, and they seem in some ways to be written by vastly different people.

Schulkind explains in her editor's note, "'A Sketch of the Past' covers some of the same ground as the preceding memoir but from such a different angle of vision that there is not, in a significant sense, any repetition" (*Moments of Being* 61). Indeed, though the period of time is roughly the same for the bulk of the two pieces, the perspectives from which they are covered present a much different narrative. Woolf comments upon this difference in perspective in the beginning pages of "A Sketch:" "I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past. [...] I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves attached to it" (*Moments of Being* 67). The technique she adopts in this later memoir drives a very different narrative frame.

With respect to Hirst's and Manier's narrative role schema, one of the primary differences between the two memoirs is that "A Sketch" takes on the role of monitor here, reflecting corrections and changes of emphasis from the previous memoir, as well as entering into more direct interactions with the *Mausoleum Book*. Woolf engages more directly with her heteroglot background. She seems more fully aware of the previous voices (including her own), and through her revisions, she takes a firm approach to owning her language with this final memoir. This text includes more conversation than the first, as if Woolf had decided to attempt replication or at least representation of the lost voices of her childhood, rather than lamenting their absence, as already noted in "Reminiscences." The monitoring role is clear in specific instances when she

asserts her authorial voice more strongly and engages more directly with the narrative. She explains the main problem she sees with the memoir: “They leave out the person to whom things happened. [...] And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened” (*Moments of Being* 65). Here, Woolf stakes out her position as correcting what she sees as faults of the earlier family memoir contributions. She means to illuminate the personae rather than chronicle events.

Woolf’s other autobiographical writings included in *Moments of Being* provide additional contrast in terms of her narrative technique and authorial interaction with the audience. Woolf wrote a number of pieces for a group of friends and colleagues called the Memoir Club. This club, started in 1920, consisted of many of Woolf’s Bloomsbury compatriots and was founded upon the idea of complete and frank honesty. The members would write and share memoirs periodically throughout the 1920s through the mid-1930s. Vanessa Bell’s short memoir about Woolf was shared with the members after Woolf’s death.⁹ Woolf’s final contribution to the club (“Am I a Snob?”) as included in *Moments of Being* is from 1936; and while it is conceivable that “A Sketch” emerged as a proposed contribution, the styles and tones are quite different. Schulkind says of Woolf’s Memoir Club writings:

In each of the selections there is an author playing to her audience: familiar but not exactly intimate, reminiscent but never sentimental, clever and often facetious, gamboling over surface oddities rather than probing – thoughtfully, hesitantly – the nature of memory and consciousness, of self

⁹ As cited in the Stape’s brief heading to the endnotes on his reprinting of Bell’s memoir.

and reality, as in ‘A Sketch of the Past.’ (*Moments of Being* 161)

Here, Schulkind points out the fact that Woolf’s memoirs written for the club have an air of theatricality. Her placement of certain details emphasizes shock value rather than a narrative integrity. For example, she reveals in the final paragraph of “22 Hyde Park Gate” that George Duckworth, half-brother to the Stephen girls, “was their lover also” (*Moments of Being* 177). Because the memoir contains no further explanation or exploration of the psychological effects of such a situation, it seems to place more weight on the audience’s reaction to the final revelation than on the piece as a whole.

Particularly when contrasted with the Memoir Club contributions, “A Sketch” reads much like a conversation within Woolf’s own consciousness, promoting sincerity over theatricality. In commenting on the structure of “A Sketch,” Gail Griffin notes, “the diary form permits a dialogue between past and present that gives ‘A Sketch of the Past’ yet another gentle structure” (117). Her notion of the dialogue provides an interesting backdrop for this discussion of how the pieces themselves also interact through the years. Woolf’s dialogue between her present and past selves is also apparent in her more pronounced use of metanarrative. In one particularly important passage, she describes her interaction with “sledge-hammer” blows – events that are painful and traumatizing:

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost power to hurt me; it gives me [...] a great delight to put the severed parts together.

Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what. (*Moments of Being* 72)

This explanation of the power that writing gives her is itself a part of the portrait she creates. In taking the time to address the camera, so to speak, she creates an intimacy between herself and her audience that is lacking in the first piece. She arguably reveals more of herself in the vignettes and commentaries than she does in the whole of “Reminiscences”: the ecstasy she receives from her memories of St. Ives or the comfort she feels in the memories of her mother give a rich character to her writing. Such an observation fits with Hirst’s and Manier’s discussions about the process of reflection and narrative: “The more we reflect on our memories, the more we shape them into narratives, and the more we draw them into the socially textured realm of communication and discourse” (288). Further time for reflection between the events and the second memoir led naturally to further constructions of those memories into narrative forms that could be more easily communicated.

Woolf also seems to be consciously rewriting certain details of the experiences as well, particularly in her treatment of her father. Throughout “Reminiscences,” her criticism is rather mild, especially when viewed in contrast with the content of “A Sketch.” Whereas before she attributed his demanding behavior to the grief-induced isolation of a widower, now she ascribes violence and rage to him. She says: “Never have I felt such rage and such frustration. For not a word of what I felt – that unbounded contempt for

him and of pity for Nessa – could be expressed” (*Moments of Being* 145). Rather than her earlier attempts to soften the blow, in “A Sketch,” she finally allows her feelings of contempt and frustration to move to the page. She calls her later description “an unexaggerated account” of that particular interaction with her father. Schulkind discusses this freedom in her introduction: “In frankly acknowledging the vehemence of her anger against him she is free to acknowledge the depth of her love and affection for him” (13).¹⁰

She also no longer casts the glow of her adoration for her mother on the whole of the memoir; instead she moves the focus to the Stephen family after the deaths of Julia and Stella. She spends more time developing a picture of their grief and adjustment, the process of “us four” becoming separate (*Moments of Being* 125). Woolf gives some insight into this phenomenon within the pages of her sketch: “As one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and this explanation blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow,” which allows her to find “a token of some real thing behind appearances” (*Moments of Being* 72). After more than thirty years, the events themselves are solidly in the past, and Woolf, through writing and re-writing bits and pieces of her life, is able to take full control over them and – ironically – reveal them in an attempt to write a *true* account of her life. In this way, her memoir exemplifies the characteristics of the role of monitor.

¹⁰ Schulkind attributes this newfound freedom to Woolf’s introduction to the writings of Sigmund Freud in the period between “Reminiscences” and “A Sketch,” which gave her “a greater understanding and acceptance of her feelings towards her father” (13).

Even more interesting are the moments where she reveals details about the writing process unique to the memoir itself. Phyllis Frus McCord explains Woolf's narrative tool this way: "The continual references to the process of remembering and figuring forth a life are not trivial features but a kind of narrative self-reference, the text's account of its own coming-into-being" (251). In this context, the text itself is the product of not only the experiences themselves, but of the interaction between the experiences and the act of reflecting upon those experiences; the interaction between the two is foregrounded by the heavier authorial voice. In one entry, Woolf explains her reasoning behind including dates at the beginning of the entries, which is to give a contrast between past and present: "It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time" (*Moments of Being* 75). Just as Griffin states, Woolf's form gives room for a dialogue between the past and present, but in this case, it is a conscious choice. Her "Sketch" feels more intimate because in this sense, she is her only audience. She is performing an autobiographical monologue, conversing across decades with her own experiences, and thus also with her previous memoir.

As a contrast to this internal perspective, however, Woolf also introduces within "A Sketch" a degree of separation between her childhood and her adulthood that seems somewhat artificial. As an example, she describes three men who died when she was a child, and she asserts that her memories of them

remain untouched: “They all died when I was a child. Therefore they have never been altered. I see them exactly as I saw them then” (*Moments of Being* 73). But this suggests that memory has a static quality that she fails to ascribe to any other memory she relates. This inconsistency draws attention to the fact that the other portraits she presents are not untouched, that their influence on her and her interaction with them is more fluid and obviously more meaningful.

Though her descriptions of the gentlemen contain the language of a woman of letters, rather than that of a child, and she characterizes them in the company of “one more caricature,” she claims that those particular memories are isolated from the decades that passed between their deaths and her text. It is also particularly interesting that she mentions them in the context of discussing the characters of Charles Dickens; in a way, she frames her own memories of these three particular men in the context of the elements of a fictitious narrative. By so doing, she seems to be attempting a memoir that is not a failure, as she sees most to be: that is, a memoir that contains the people to whom things happen. To create such a memoir, she invokes the image of a famed fiction writer – Dickens – to acknowledge using the tools of a fiction writer to present characters. She writes that in her life as a child, “there were of course people; and these people were very like characters in Dickens. They were caricatures; they were very simple; they were immensely alive” (*Moments of Being* 73). By presenting her mother, her father, and other family members the way Dickens would present a

character, she feels she is able to make them “immensely alive” in order to make her memoir meaningful.

Her recollection of those men has a different tenor from the rest of the memories she relates, which adds an intriguing complexity to the memoir. This particular recollection hearkens back to Paul Ricoeur’s illusion about the purity of past facts as discussed in the previous section.¹¹ Ricoeur described the folly of ascribing certainty to facts as they emerge through the process of recollection, since those details do not and cannot remain unchanged. The act of recollection and the process of framing those recollections places memories in an asynchronous context. Woolf’s assertion here simultaneously reinforces and rejects the fluidity of the author’s memory, but the fluidity is what arguably makes a memoir valuable.

This particular complexity also necessitates a discussion of the framing of “A Sketch” in general. Though Woolf would have undoubtedly edited and revised more fully had she been explicitly preparing the manuscript for publication, the confidential and conversational tone was not necessarily merely a function of the journal-like format. In discussing this work’s improvements upon the earlier memoir, Zwerdling comments: “Yet to treat Woolf’s final endeavor to write her life story as a triumphant solution to the problems she faced in recounting it, is to play down the experimental quality of that work, its deliberate ‘sketchiness’” (168). Her form reinforces the content, in that she uses the idea of note-taking to frame the fragments of memory that she shares. The

¹¹ See p. 21

narrative voice develops together with the subject matter to heighten the intimate quality of the piece. Woolf's entry on June 20, 1939 begins: "I was thinking as I crossed the Channel last night of Stella. [...] How many people are there still able to think about Stella on the 20th June 1939" (*Moments of Being* 95). Her portrait of Stella that follows then gains a heightened value as something rare that only Woolf can render. But in the following entry dated almost a month later, Woolf confides: "I have not given her a thought since. The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths" (98). The form of the memoir allows Woolf to portray the ephemeral nature of memory, moving between memories and portraits as the days and months change. Dahl says of this memoir as a whole: "Technique is a function of the process of perception, and technique itself becomes discovery" (192). Dahl is saying that the form of the memoir itself is a consequence of the fact that Woolf is capturing memories in brief sections, but that the form then spurs additional opportunities for discovery.

Now with all three memoirs under consideration, it is easier to appreciate the powerful influence Stephen had upon his daughter and the extent to which the family's lives became intertwined. Dahl is one of a number of scholars who have traced Woolf's ancestry of writers and, more specifically, the Stephen tradition of autobiographical writing through three generations, starting with Woolf's grandfather, Sir James Stephen. The compulsion to share stories was

apparently quite strong among members of the family: the *Hyde Park Gate News* was a family newspaper helmed by Woolf, Vanessa, and Thoby in the years before their mother's death. This tendency toward storytelling brings into perspective the powerful group narrative touched on earlier. Bruner's and Feldman's observation about the sharing of stories is relevant to this larger theme:

A culture's 'literary' heritage is also seen by its members as somehow constituting the identity of the group. But though they may not be used directly as models for the constructing of a self, the stories at least make possible the negotiation of highly personal meanings with others. (295)

It is this act of *negotiating* meaning that is of most interest for this study, as it describes perfectly the interaction of the texts under review. "Reminiscences" is in many ways a direct reflection of Stephen's *Mausoleum Book*, but the conversation goes deeper than that. Woolf is emulating her father's writing style and subject matter, engaging with his text in a fairly straightforward manner. "Reminiscences" bears the stamp of an apprentice writer trying her hand at an intimate family portrayal; whether it is successful is a matter of opinion. Vanessa Bell writes in her memoir that Woolf "was very sensitive to criticism and the good opinion of grown-ups" (8), and it is quite possible that Woolf was appealing to this desired good opinion, though her parents were both dead.

And reading these two pieces in conjunction with "A Sketch" allows this later memoir to highlight Woolf's more sophisticated autobiographical technique. Woolf's sketch is not an isolated piece of autobiographical writing,

though it may be read as such. The intervening years between “Reminiscences” and “A Sketch” allow plenty of time for perspective and experience to take root in a young writer. In the first piece, Woolf does not have a sense of her own narrative voice yet, but in the later piece, as Hermione Lee puts it, “the ‘Sketch of the Past’ has the depth and experience of her whole writing life behind it, and is able to make a profound, detailed analysis of how she writes about herself” (19). The narrative power she gains in finding and sharing the representative and enduring scenes represents a tremendous leap forward in terms of literary achievement.

Even beyond the structure of the writing itself, her approach to her later subject matter is also quite different. As already documented, Woolf was much milder in her treatment of her father in the earlier memoir. Alex Zwerdling suggests that her earlier reluctance to write negative things about her father has a familial tie: “Her inhibition was rooted in the common practice of writing for the family, which came with the territory of the family memoir as a distinct form of autobiography” (171). After years of writing about various incarnations of her parents and childhood years, she was finally able to move beyond the family dynamic and interact with her experiences on a more personal and productive level. Mitchell A. Leaska, who edited Woolf’s early journals, comments on the power that writing had on her ability to cope with traumatic “sledgehammer blows:” “It was with words that she learned to bring coherence to an existence that was otherwise contradictory and hopelessly fragmented” (*A Passionate*

Apprentice, xxxvii). It is interesting to note here that her best writing about this time period follows a less structured, more fragmentary form to reflect on a time in her life that was broken up repeatedly by traumatic events. The freedom of form seems to reinforce the freedom of voice with which she writes.

Looking at these pieces as members of a conversation is a means of seeing the ways they interact with one another. As any act of autobiographical writing is an act of or effort at communication, the study is particularly rewarding with multiple examples of such writing from within a family. To see the way their narrative styles resemble one another and differ is to gain a larger picture of the family as a whole. These pieces take on a different light in the context of *To the Lighthouse*, which fictionalizes the events depicted while also giving a more concrete voice to some of the other members in the family who did not or could not contribute their own voices. It places these memoirs in a broader scope as Woolf attempts to universalize her experiences, and further emphasizes their interconnected nature.

CHAPTER 3: *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1927, has been considered by many to be one of her finest. To put this in some context, Mark Hussey gives an example of its reception in his introduction to one edition of the novel:

In 1930 the influential Cambridge professor and critic F. R. Leavis, for example, made an exception to his habitual distaste for Woolf's writing and placed *To the Lighthouse* alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as an expression of the finest consciousness of its time. (Woolf/Hussey, xxxv)

Even those not particularly fond of Woolf's sometimes difficult prose have found her treatment of the passing of time as told through the story of one complex family compelling; her characters are richly drawn, and the family interactions are intimate and honest. The story is simple, but the themes are woven more intricately through symbolism and analogy.

The first of three sections, titled "The Window," tells of the Ramsay family and their guests visiting their summer home in Scotland, particularly centering on an ongoing discussion about whether the sea conditions would allow the children to take a trip to the nearby lighthouse. The middle section "Time Passes" chronicles the decay of the summer home in subsequent years as the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew are told in bracketed asides; towards the end of the section, the caretakers start to rehabilitate the house to prepare for the return of the Ramsay family. In "The Lighthouse," the third and

final section, the reader finds the remaining Ramsay children and Mr. Ramsay, along with family friend Lily Briscoe, returning to the summer home ten years after the first section to finally make the trip to the lighthouse; significantly, Lily is also able to finish her painting of Mrs. Ramsay, which she began ten years earlier.

And though critics debate how to classify the novel's ties to autobiographical fact, the characters, settings, and events are clearly drawn from Woolf's experiences as a child. Though elements of true-to-life events appear in many of Woolf's novels, *To the Lighthouse* draws nearer to being called an autobiographical novel than anything else she produced. Woolf herself outlines exactly what she wants to include in the novel: "father's character complete in it; & mother's; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in – life, death, etc" (Woolf, *Diary* 18-19). So even though the end result cannot be called an autobiography by any means, there are obvious autobiographical elements throughout the novel that allow room for analyzing this novel in conjunction with her other autobiographical writings. Alice Van Buren Kelly summarizes the text nicely by saying that while *To the Lighthouse* has "its roots in autobiography, the branches and the fruit are fiction" (47). This analogy perfectly describes the closely connected pieces of life and art as they work through this novel, for it also allows their different purposes to stand out. What grew out of real life experiences was transformed through Woolf's narrative technique into something more universal and artistic in its appeal.

From Woolf's perspective, the logic behind the novel is a little simpler: writing *To the Lighthouse* was a psychoanalytic experience. She says in "A Sketch" of writing the novel: "I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" (*Moments of Being* 81). She discusses how she had been consumed with the memory of her mother through the years before writing the novel, and once she had committed the story to paper, she "ceased to be obsessed with [her] mother" (81). How much of her life surfaces in the novel is ultimately left up to individual interpretation, but the fact is that Woolf herself felt that the process of writing this novel in particular was instrumental in laying to rest the ghosts of her parents, of putting aside the emotions she had never been able to express. Indeed, the end of the novel carries a sense of completion or closure in the lives of most of the remaining characters.

Despite such assertions from Woolf, some scholars counter that it is hardly autobiographical at all. Avrom Fleishman included a section on Woolf in his volume about Victorian autobiography (1983). He writes: "Virginia Woolf completed no autobiography that can stand alone beside her name and even the novel that approaches closest to her personal experience only debatably qualifies as autobiographical fiction" (454). But he goes on to comment about how her art is influenced heavily by her own life experiences: "Of late, the publication of her letters and journals has brought home how much of her art turns on a few central facts subtly varied in a series of imaginative transformations" (454). It is this aspect that will be of most interest through the rest of this thesis. These

“imaginative transformations” recall elements of her life as detailed in her memoirs, placing this novel into conversation with the other Woolf/Stephen memoirs. I will now look at the narrative style of *To the Lighthouse* in the context of the memoirs already discussed to investigate how this novel fits into the narrative picture of the Woolf/Stephen family, and how this novel can fill in some missing pieces for the family’s shared memory.

The narrative workings of *To the Lighthouse* have been treated in numerous scholarly articles. But the most important aspect here is not merely the narrative style, but the way the narrative interacts with Woolf’s and Stephen’s memoirs. A particularly useful article by David Herman (2006) analyzes dialogue throughout the text through a variety of disciplines including linguistics and gender studies to get a sense of how speech works in the novel. I would like to focus on Herman’s discussion of figural narration, or narration in which the author makes no clear distinction between first- and third-person narration. In novels using this narrative style, of which there were many throughout the modernist period, Herman notes: “it is not always clear which statements are authenticated by the narrator and which index the particularized, biased, and thus non-authoritative (or relatively less authoritative) cognitive-perceptual activity of a character” (76). Essentially, the narration makes ambiguous the line between what is actually happening and what may be observed, felt, or thought by a character. Within the novel, inward narration switches quickly between characters, and weaves in and out of third-person narration quite seamlessly.

This narrative approach may in some ways mimic the tone of a memoir, in which one's own thoughts become mixed together with recalled facts and the business of storytelling. In a scene early in the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay discuss the possibility of the lighthouse trip with some of their guests and James, the Ramsay's youngest child. Woolf writes of Mrs. Ramsay: "She looked up – what demon possessed him, her youngest, her cherished? – and saw the room, saw the chairs, thought them fearfully shabby" (26). In the space of a single sentence, Woolf moves between narrating action and relating one of the character's thoughts. In a more elaborate example, the narration follows Mrs. Ramsay as she walks to town with Charles Tansley, one of their guests. The passage continues:

As for her little bag, might he not carry that? No, no, she said, she always carried *that* herself. She did too. Yes, he felt that in her. He felt many things. [...] He would like her to see him, gowned and hooded, walking in a procession. A fellowship, a professorship, he felt capable of anything and saw himself – but what was she looking at? (11)

The novel offers a more complex version of memoir-style recollections, with multiple characters sharing narrative responsibilities, while there is also an elusive omniscient narrator stepping in from time to time. The exposition is removed or is far more subtle than one might expect from traditional novels. At times, the characters through whom the story is told, such as Mr. Tansley, are not particularly central, leading through some tangents that combine with the main action to tell the complete story.

In these ways, Woolf creates some degree of reader disorientation. In the beginning of the novel, the reader is essentially dropped into the middle of a scene with no background on the characters and no understanding of what has come before. The figural narration provides a less tangible connection to the narrator and a less conventional narrative interaction. But Herman suggests that by doing so, Woolf also creates a deeper connection between reader and character: “By deauthenticating its own narration, or at least conferring on stretches of the narration an indeterminate degree of authoritativeness, Woolf’s text aligns its readers with the characters who are likewise trying to make sense of discourse events” (77). The idea is that the characters themselves are attempting to situate their own thoughts in connection with the other characters, while the reader attempts the same process. This process of situating for the reader occurs when, as Herman states, dialogue is interpreted “holistically,” or when the speech and actions of the characters are conceived as a group, rather than piece by piece.

This concept of holistic interpretation is reminiscent of the theory of dialogism. Bakhtin’s philosophical theory of the interconnectedness of texts and voices is often applied to literature, and it works well in this case. Similar to Genette’s discussion of palimpsest texts, Bakhtin theorizes that all language connects past, present and future, that texts are communicating with what was written previously as well as anticipating responses. Bakhtin writes that “language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private

property of the speaker's intentions" but that language is "populated with the intention of others" (294). Katerina Koutsantoni expands on this idea in applying Bakhtin's theory to Woolf's collection of essays, *The Common Reader*.

She writes:

The belief that ideological creation and its comprehension only take place in the process of social intercourse, so being determined by the collective's existence, is fundamental to Bakhtin's dialogic theory. There is a mechanism of solidarity operating between writer and reader, a fusion of their voices, which creates this dialogism. (157)

Woolf's fusion of voices occurs both within the novel through her use of figurative narration, as well as contextually with the memoirs, among other texts.

Woolf uses the narrative to delineate an intimate family space, similar to the way she frames her memoir. She also resists framing the plot and setting in a standard fashion, a move that creates an initial distance between the text and the reader. She essentially makes the reader an outsider. Though the story is not particularly intimate, the way in which Woolf introduces the characters and plot make them less accessible from the outset. The novel opens in the middle of the first conversation about going to the lighthouse occurring between the Ramsays and their son James. The context for the discussion about the weather is not clarified until two pages later at the mention of bringing a gift for the lighthouse keeper's son (5). As the list of characters expands, Woolf allows the relationships between some of the cast to remain a mystery; in fact, it is never revealed how the Ramsays know either Charles Tansley or Lily Briscoe. But

once the setting is established, the characters and the nature of their interactions begin to take shape.

This complex narrative style also accomplishes another goal that Eudora Welty describes in her foreword to another edition of the novel: “The interior of the characters’ lives is where we experience everything. And in the subjective – contrary to what so many authors find there – lies its clarity” (Woolf/Welty, viii). Woolf’s subjective narrative quality, as Welty calls it, gives the characters depth, and while this lends richness to the novel’s development, it also breathes life into the role that memory plays. Though the novel itself may be only loosely based on autobiography, Woolf cultivated its life from the details of her own, which lends more power to the character development. Woolf’s sister, Vanessa Bell, said in a letter to Woolf after reading the novel:

It is almost painful to have [Mother] so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms. (qtd in Fleishman 460)

Woolf’s subjective narrative brings out the details of the characters. Even for readers who have no tangible or imagined connection to Julia Stephen can appreciate the intimacy of her portrait within the novel through the character of Mrs. Ramsay. The novel emphasizes the internal or subjective conflicts of the characters.

In particular, the focus on Mrs. Ramsay returns to the central idea of a family autobiography. As Vanessa Bell points out, the character of Mrs. Ramsay

introduces anew the idea and essence of Julia Stephen for her children to meet again “on equal terms.” The novel gives narrative control for a sizable portion of the first section to Mrs. Ramsay, who is revealed as critical but kind and patient. Her thoughts about the people around her and their actions are abundantly represented, whereas the children and Mr. Ramsay rarely, if ever, get to share their own narrative angles while Mrs. Ramsay is still alive. Mrs. Ramsay’s interactions with her husband convict Mr. Ramsay quite convincingly of the same faults that Leslie Stephen accused himself of when writing his apologetic memoirs. But Woolf details the events from Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective, something her family never received from Julia Stephen. It is my argument here that Woolf fills in some of the missing voices from the autobiographical conversation in progress at this point in time. Fleishman says of the novel: “Above all, the fiction represents the author’s parents in a deliberate and consummate act of detailed mimesis” (458). Though not to say the novel would not be as good without the autobiographical ties, this mimesis is one of the main engines behind the novel’s most important character development. Through the novel, she corrects a situation noted in “A Sketch:” “The tragedy of [our mother’s] death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal” (*Moments of Being* 95). Through the character of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf is able in some way to make her mother real again, and through the third section, give closure and meaning to their family’s tragedy.

Since the whole text pivots around the second section and Mrs. Ramsay's death, Woolf's inclusions of details of the time period, as well as her careful departures from those events, provide an interesting backdrop for analyzing the novel against the memoir. Woolf includes a few scenes that speak to the experiences she details in her memoirs that were highly influential upon her. One in particular is given in the same bracketed statement where Mrs. Ramsay's death is revealed or directly discussed: "Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty" (128). The scene is reminiscent of, but slightly different from, the scene she recounts in "A Sketch of the Past" after Woolf's mother died. She recounts: "My father staggered from the bedroom as we came. I stretched out my arms to stop him, but he brushed past me, crying out something I could not catch; distraught. And George led me in to kiss my mother, who had just died" (*Moments of Being* 91). The tones of the two scenes are very similar: they both include a sense of morbidity and close proximity to death, with the image of the distraught husband reeling through a seemingly empty and uncomfortable house. The most interesting detail here is how Woolf makes Mr. Ramsay a solitary grieving figure, rather than depicting him more similarly to her own father, whose defining quality is his inability to comfort his children through his own anguish. The image of the empty outstretched arms makes both depictions appear slightly grotesque, but in the memoir, the empty arms are Woolf's, whereas they are

transferred to the father figure in the novel. Though perhaps an unimportant and even unconscious change, this pivotal moment in both the author's life and in the course of the novel sets up Mr. Ramsay's development as a character capable of achieving and providing closure as the novel draws to its finish.

One of the seemingly more incidental departures from real-life chronology is that of Woolf's time setting. The ten-year period covered by the novel includes World War I, though the events depicted occurred in Woolf's own life prior to the turn of the century, which adds significant depth to the larger themes of the novel. She also groups the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew together in the span of a few pages, whereas Julia Stephen and Stella died within a few years of each other, but Thoby's death (presumably the inspiration for Andrew's demise) occurred in 1907, about ten years after Stella's death. Though the shift could be little more than a plot convenience or personal choice of the author, it introduces additional underlying meaning based on the powerful imagery conjured by including World War I. At the very least, it is an evocative move.

On a symbolic level, the inclusion of World War I underscores the fundamental disruption and destruction experienced by the Ramsay family during the years of the second section. Through the second section, the house that represents their happiness as a family begins to decay and crumble from years of neglect. The beginning of the home's downfall is detailed using war imagery: "So with the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses

rolled round, those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing-room that wholly resisted them” (*To the Lighthouse* 128-129). The desolation is evident through these descriptions of death and decay. And they signify in a graphic manner the same thing that Woolf will go on to describe in “A Sketch:” “[My mother] was the centre; it was herself. This was proved on May 5th 1895. For after that day, there was nothing left of it” (*Moments of Being* 84). The use of World War I elucidates the family’s catastrophe on a more global scale, where the war drastically changed the way an entire generation viewed the world and their place in it.

The shift in narrative presence also enhances the imagery of the ruined family home. Towards the end of the second section and throughout the third, the narrative perspective shifts primarily from within the Ramsay family to Lily Briscoe. Lily presents an interesting counterpoint to the family. Through Lily’s outside connection to the events of the novel, Woolf is able to present a unique perspective that captures the distance the author herself has from the events of decades earlier, but also through the Ramsay children, she elucidates what the Stephen children may have felt at the time everything happened. In the final section, Lily is affectionate toward Mr. Ramsay, recognizing the trauma his family has been through. After a scene in which Lily comments on the beauty of Mr. Ramsay’s boots, wishing she could say something more substantial or more sincere, she shares a tender moment with him: “Why, at this completely

inappropriate moment, when he was stooping over her shoe, should she be so tormented with sympathy for him that?" (154). Earlier in the novel, Lily wonders "why [Mr. Ramsay] needed always praise; why so brave a man in thought should be so timid in life; how strangely he was venerable and laughable at the same time" (45). She revises this previous commentary on him to favor a much more sympathetic view. This is something of a turning point in the novel for Mr. Ramsay's character, as he is depicted most of the time with a characteristic harshness and selfishness. His own son elucidates the "extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children's breasts:" "Had there been an axe handy or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it" (4). At the end of the novel, Lily starts to represent an alternate view.

Lily also seems to merge with some version of an adult Woolf, which adds some interesting parallelism to the novel. Alice Van Buren Kelly goes so far as to say that Woolf and Lily are essentially the same:

And she (Lily) is Virginia herself. She completes her painting when she is forty-four, after gaining through time, the perspective she needs to see Mrs. Ramsay clearly, as Woolf was forty-four when she finished *To the Lighthouse*, her own exercise in putting her parents in perspective. (49)

Though this statement may oversimplify much, Lily's completion of the portrait coincides with the end of the novel; the character and author complete their works together, both being a portrait in one way or another, of the mother figure in their lives. And because this novel already includes so many ties to Woolf's

own life, it is not illogical or irresponsible to note connections between the author and the characters.

The exceptional detail in this scenario is that Lily is not a member of the family, and though she is a close family friend, she is essentially an outsider. Woolf portrays an interesting perspective through this parallelism; she writes Lily in a way that mirrors her own confrontations with the past as recorded years later in "A Sketch." Lily seems to have the same difficulty reconciling her memories with the present that Woolf writes about in her later memoir. The duality between Woolf and her character seems to display a process that Fleishman observes in Woolf's autobiographical writing: "The act of confronting oneself as aesthetic object, in order to write oneself down on paper, singles the autobiographer out for a struggle of self-transformation that might be called heroic" (470). Lily could be seen, in the last section of the novel, to be Woolf's "aesthetic object," which brings a new complexity to the course of the novel.

Interestingly, while using Lily to portray a somewhat distanced perspective, Woolf uses the Ramsay children to represent the more embattled viewpoint that characterizes Woolf's own childhood struggles with her father. Though Woolf is not necessarily attempting to be autobiographical with her portrayal of the Ramsay children, she provides a counterpoint through which to address more fully the complexities of the Ramsay family's situation. The trip to the lighthouse is particularly telling of the children's struggle, where James and

Cam are each engaging with their father's disappointments and quirks, trying to understand and qualify their relationship with him. For example, Cam likens her father, reading fiercely in the boat on the way to the lighthouse, to a tyrant and vows that she and James will "fight tyranny to the death." And James, perhaps more poignantly, sees loneliness as the quality he shares with his father: "that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things" (203). The children are stuck with a precarious understanding of their own father and a tenuous relationship with him, much like the relationship that comes to light in Woolf's memoirs. For instance, the murderous rage with which James regards his father, cited earlier, anticipates the "frustrated fury" Woolf describes being elicited from her by her interactions with her father after Stella's death in "A Sketch of the Past" (*Moments of Being* 108).

On a narrative level, these details engage with all three memoirs; of course "A Sketch of the Past" would not be written until more than a decade later, but some of what will show up in the later memoir begins to rise to the surface in the novel. Elements of each coalesce through Woolf's tone and the structure of the details she includes. Through the Ramsay children, she presents a tense father-child relationship fraught with impotent anger and miscommunication. Again, I am not suggesting that Woolf's novel is a veiled memoir, but the relationship she chronicles in her own memoirs both before and after the novel is echoed through the relationship between the novel's characters.

Woolf also highlights some of the same shortcomings in Mr. Ramsay that Stephen bemoans in his own memoir. His tendency toward self-centeredness and his obsession with intellectualism tie Stephen to Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay's voyage with his children, then, speaks on a higher level in this autobiographical discourse. Though Stephen may never have been able to give his children the same sort of experience that Mr. Ramsay is finally able to give Cam and James, Woolf allows the father figure some closure. The children are also able to bond with their father through the trip to the lighthouse. Mr. Ramsay rises above his own shortcomings as a father to praise his young son, which both children recognize as a long-awaited event (204). The relationships seen through the lens of the novel appear more concretely satisfying than what appears to erupt through Woolf's later memoir.

Though *To the Lighthouse* may not be considered an autobiographical novel by many, it contributes much to the study of Woolf's and Stephen's autobiographical writings. The novel works in concert with these family memoirs to provide narrative resolution where none was previously found, and to give voice to characters who may have missed the opportunity to contribute their own narrative. The memoirs seem to present the shortcomings and problems plaguing the Stephen family, where the novel tries to achieve resolution. The intersection of these works can be summarized using this phrase from Tresa Grauer, "the living memory of the changing same," which she clarifies further as the way "memory enacted through repetition of stories makes

it possible to conceive of the past as an ongoing part of the present rather than as something to which one can return only with a kind of melancholy nostalgia” (Grauer 43). Woolf’s “repetition of stories” through continual engagement with the events of her past in both memoir and fiction allows one to trace the family conversation as it unfolds. The conversation about the shared Woolf/Stephen past, initialized by Stephen and elaborated upon again and again by Woolf, epitomizes Woolf’s idea that “none are really isolated” (*Moments of Being* 30). Indeed, the constellation of texts is capable of revealing far more than any single isolated text.

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