

# Portrait of the Artist in the Work of Virginia Woolf

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Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Antonia Bakmaz**

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Zadar, 2018.



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## 1. Introduction

This paper deals with Virginia Woolf's attitudes and convictions about the artist, art and the process of artistic creation, which are ever-present topics in her writing, both fictional and non-fictional. The aim of this paper is to consider the portrayal of art and the artist from the viewpoint of Woolf's theoretical and critical essays, but also with reference to three of her novels which feature artist figures as central characters: Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, Orlando in the homonymous novel and Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*.

In order to understand diverse influences on an artist's ideas and values, it is necessary to take into consideration the historical context, and the political and social events and circumstances present during their lifetime. This is especially relevant in case of artists who lived in such a period of history as Virginia Woolf – not only was it a time during which important reforms were happening in various spheres of life, fundamentally transforming the perception of reality, but it was also most prominently defined by the First World War, which influenced the emergence of the Modernist movement. As the central figure of the Bloomsbury Group and a novelist associated with Modernism, Woolf's artistic attitudes can be regarded from the viewpoint of these influences. Some of her most prominent conceptions about what the artist should attempt to convey and her ideas about what is necessary for the creation of a work of art build upon those of her contemporaries. Her departure from established artistic conventions and rejection of the realistic style of writing, then, is no surprise. Progressive in her artistic ideas and style, it seems that Woolf was constantly experimenting and pursuing original, unprecedented ways of literary expression, providing an innovative facet to her works.

Each of the central characters of the three novels discussed in this paper represents a different means of artistic expression: painting, poetry and playwriting, but the obvious thing in common to all three artists is that they are all women – in Orlando's case, in the second half

of the novel. Woolf's focus in discourse related to art is very frequently on gender issues such as androgyny, gender roles, the unfair position of female artists and just as unfair representation of female characters in art. These three novels can be seen as a female variation of the *Künstlerroman*. While the traditional artist novel usually centers upon a male artist character and deals with his psychological growth and creative development, Woolf modifies it to tackle questions such as the opposition between the domestic role imposed on women by the society and their artistic ambition.

Apart from the Modernist rejection of realism and questions of gender in art, other points which are relevant when trying to understand Virginia Woolf's aesthetics, and which will be analyzed in this paper, are the concept of the artist's personal vision, the connection between Modernism in literature and Post-Impressionism in painting, the notion of impersonality as the ideal state of mind for creation, fragmentation and unity, and the role of the audience.

## 2. Historical circumstances and the Modernist approach to the novel

Virginia Woolf lived and wrote in a time marked by technological, political and societal changes, and witnessed the end of the Victorian time. Whereas the Victorian era was a period of industrial and economic prosperity for the British Empire, twentieth century brought a decline of its power, particularly after the Second World War (Mitchell 15). In the Victorian society, the way of life was dictated by the rules of the social class and gender that one belonged to. Moreover, it differed greatly for members of the working class, the middle class and the aristocracy, as well as for members of the rural, town and city society (18). The Victorians nourished a domestic image of womanhood. The middle-class woman was expected to keep to family life, subdued to and financially dependent on her husband. Her duties included taking care of the children and the household, providing emotional support for her family and demonstrating self-sacrifice and pious service to others, while restraining from her own desires and keeping away from business and politics, which were men's domains. This image of the ideal woman was known as "the Angel in the House" after the title of Coventry Patmore's narrative poem praising the same values (266). In the late nineteenth century, however, this feminine ideal was weakened and challenged by the New Woman movement, which opposed traditional conventions, valuing independence and deprecating marriage (270). This influenced the growth of feminism, which initially had as the main objectives improvement of work opportunities, education and obtaining the right to vote (Whitworth 51). By the end of the Victorian period, technological progress and scientific discoveries had altered the way of thinking, somewhat disturbing people's trust in church and the influence of religion (Mitchell 84). There was progress in women's rights and the discrepancies between classes were decreasing. British imperial power was challenged and experienced a further decline with the World Wars (Whitworth 34). When it comes to the fight for women's rights, it continued and strengthened; Woolf witnessed, as well as actively



advocated, significant changes in the perception of womanhood and women's rights, such as advances in educational rights and the removal of work restrictions, opening more jobs to women (Goldman 112, Whitworth 30).

After the strict Victorian morality, the Modernist literary movement, spanning roughly from the First World War to the 1940s, stands out in the first half of the twentieth century with its experimentation and detachment from tradition. However, the beginning of the century was marked by realist novelists (referred to as 'materialists' by Virginia Woolf) such as Rudyard Kipling, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells (Sanders 487, Woolf, *MF* 60). This realist group of novelists only enhances the contrast of what followed: the Modernists' rejection of the existing, traditional forms of literary expression. They brought thorough literary changes and innovation, largely in response to all the political and societal changes occurring in the world. Apart from the circumstances such as industrialization and warfare, a strong influence on the Modernists came from psychological and philosophical theories, particularly Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Henri Bergson's innovative views of time (Carter 350). Freud's influence is visible in writers' preoccupation with topics discussed extensively in Freud's work, most notably memories and the unconscious mind. Bergson was influential with his unique understanding of time as perceived by humans, according to him not logically or linearly but experiencing more temporalities simultaneously (Bergson 90, 108). In literature, this was reflected in the lack of separation of past and present events (Carter 393). Apart from that, Modernist literature was also impacted by visual arts, and its link to Post-Impressionist painting can further be related to the influence of Roger Fry, painter, art critic and member of the Bloomsbury Group.

In 1910 Fry organized an art exhibition titled *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, coining the term 'Post-Impressionism' to denote a group of artists who continued the impressionists' departure from naturalism but where the Impressionists' deviation from

realistic representation was philosophical in that it reflected their distinctive worldview, Post-Impressionists used it to echo their psychological states. Among the exhibited paintings were some by Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh (Whitworth 15, Berkowitz). Even though the exhibition was mocked and derided by the critics, it made an impact on the new generation of artists as it offered an alternative to naturalism and more freedom in artistic expression. The Post-Impressionist artistic movement encompassed a variety of diverse styles, all of which moved away from Impressionism, but each one in a different way so that, for example, Cézanne's style is described as subjectivism, Gauguin's as primitivism and Van Gogh's as expressionism (Berkowitz). Post-Impressionism is characterized by symbolism and simplified forms used to represent the subject matter, which was often painted from memories rather than direct observation, as well as by compositions of abstract forms that implied deeper personal meanings for the painter, often painted in vivid colors ("Post-Impressionism").

Another notion that Fry introduces is that of vision. He defines the artist's aesthetic vision as an observance of "the relation of forms and colour to one another" (Fry 35). Apart from this concept, he also describes the artist's creative vision, which differs from the aesthetic vision because it does not at all rely on facts about the subject matter in real life or its exact appearance. Instead, it is the artist's subjective perception of the subject matter. Therefore, the artist's objective according to Fry should be "not to please others, but to express a feeling of his own", and the result should be an "expression of an idea in the artist's mind" (35). This attitude was present in Post-Impressionist art, which had the artist's inner vision as the originating point of the painting. In order to express their creative vision, the artist must find harmony in chaos, and achieve a state of mind which includes "detachment from any of the meanings and implications of appearances." (36) In this detached state of mind, the artist is able to find new, symbolic meaning in formal relations of forms, lines and colors, which lose their individual relevance and become significant as "bits in the whole

mosaic of vision." (36) Woolf describes the same need for detachment, which she calls "impersonality" or "unconsciousness" (Woolf, *ONKG* 17).

It is evident from the Modernists' rejection of previous conventions that a shift in what is considered important took place: the matters which were earlier the center of artistic focus no longer seemed relevant to the new generation of novelists. The traditional plot meant conforming to an objective view of reality, composed of a chronological succession of events; instead, Modernists ignored the need for plot to different extents and used techniques such as stream of consciousness, hoping to convey a subjective, individual perception of what is relevant in an experience (Carter 393).

### 3. Analysis of the artist figures in Woolf's works

#### 3.1. Artist's vision

In her essays, Woolf builds on Fry's suggestion that the motivation behind a work of art should be the inner creative vision in the artist's mind, which she characterizes as "faithfulness to one's own conceptions" (Woolf, *PC* 7). Vision for Woolf implies the author's unique perspective of, and convictions about something – the world, human life, or reality – as experienced in the unconscious. This vision should be the driving force of the creative process, making the work complete and unifying all its separate elements. The subjective vision of whatever subject matter interests the creator is of the greatest value, and it is what a work of art should aspire to communicate, according to Woolf. In order to succeed in making the work as close to the inner vision as possible, it is crucial for the author to have a lasting belief in their own vision (98). Moreover, Woolf argues that the author's vision should determine all other aspects of the work of art, and if the existing methods of creative expression fail to convey what the artist wants to communicate, a new approach is required (Woolf, *MBMB* 12).

Lily Briscoe, painter in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Orlando, poet in the homonymous novel and Miss La Trobe, playwright in *Between the Acts* all value their artistic visions. Lily is motivated by the determination to capture her artistic vision and retains a lasting belief in it: her vision of her subject matter still exists intact in her memory ten years after her first attempt in painting it. Her artistic work is driven by an urge to share her vision, and painting is the medium she uses in her struggle to get it across. Lily acknowledges the fashionable way of painting, which in the novel seems to be based upon the influence of the role-model of a fictional artist, Paunceforte. She can visualize how he would paint the scene in front of her but she is also aware that their visions have little in common and, therefore, his artistic methods are inadequate to convey her subjective perception of the scene (Woolf, *TL* 44). Lily takes her vision seriously and refuses to alter it in order to conform to the norms. Unwilling to compromise her authentic perspective, she looks for an alternative mode of painting, which is parallel to Woolf's experimental pursuits in writing. On Orlando's part, even before carrying out her own vision, she admires other artists' successfully conveyed visions, such as that of an architect who had built an enormous house on his own following "one idea in his head" (Woolf, *Orlando* 101). As for La Trobe, she carefully observes the reactions of the audience during the play and wonders if she has succeeded in making them see her vision, disheartened by those who have not understood it (Woolf, *BA* 77). She takes the failure to make these few individuals share her perception as a failure of her play altogether: "She saw Giles Oliver with his back to the audience. Also Cobbet of Cobbs Corner. She hadn't made them see. It was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. Her vision escaped her." (52)

It is evident that Woolf attaches a great importance to communicating one's artistic vision, claiming it should be the motivation which inspires artists to create, and treating it as the central objective of artistic endeavours when it comes to her fictional characters.

### 3.2. Rejection of realism

Woolf firmly disapproves of what she calls materialism in literature, referring to realist writers. While acknowledging the meticulous skill with regard to the smallest detail in depictions of their characters – "down to the last button of their coats" (*MF* 61) – Woolf declares that materialist writers are failing to grasp the essence of what art should do. She judges the focus of their attention as irrelevant for the modern author's goals, and all their efforts as directed towards depicting a trivial, superficial reality, as opposed to a deeper one that Woolf distinguishes and aims to convey in her writing (*PC* 61). "It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us" (60). These materialist writers, Woolf argues, do not claim the freedom that every writer should have when it comes to being able to write about anything and in any way that they choose, however unimportant it may seem to the public. They are limited by their need to abide by established conventional expectations and therefore allow the "tyrant" of tradition to determine the form and subject matter of their work (61).

Lily shares the same disinterest for traditional, realistic representation. The subject matter of her picture are mother and child: Mrs. Ramsay reading to James; she also mentions other elements of the observed scene such as the hedge, the tree, the wall, the step, the house. However, she does not want to paint them in any detail, or focus on their physical appearance at all. Instead, her aim is to convey her vision of Mrs. Ramsay and, at the same time, to convey something more profound by reducing what she sees to abstract forms imbued with symbolical meaning. She wants to grasp her subject on a deeper level than the superficial appearance, "subduing all her impressions as a woman to something more general" (*TL* 48).

When it comes to Orlando, her perceptions and principles related to writing change fundamentally over the course of the novel. We can almost separate different stages of her artistic development. At the beginning of the novel Orlando follows tradition and writes like

one of Woolf's materialists. He chooses the common subject matter of nature and his descriptions strive for precision in its depiction even though not only that it "spoilt his rhyme and split his metre" (*Orlando* 17), but these materialist methods prove unsuitable to convey his perception of the scene. In his realistic writing, he contradicts his vision:

"The sky is blue,' he said, 'the grass is green.' Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing the embraces of hairy satyrs from enchanted woods." (98)

He writes quickly and abundantly. His focus is on the plot, and not on the characters, which are generic and stand for concepts and ideas such as "Vice, Crime, Misery" (16). And finally, rather than using the approach that Woolf recommends and working towards the goal of grasping his own vision, Orlando imitates other, published poets and thinks about how they would depict the scene. This is reminiscent of Lily's visualization of Paunceforte's way of painting, but Orlando, unlike Lily, does not manage to resist the urge to copy others' style. In his poetry "there was never a word said as he himself would have said it" (16). Orlando's motivation for writing also undergoes a change. In the beginning, he is driven largely by ambition, desire for fame and "immortality", as he believes that literature is the one thing that escapes death and decay (79).

Later in the novel, during what could be seen as the second stage of Orlando's creative growth, influenced by the change in ages but also by his personal experiences, his style and manner of writing are altered. His expression is less ornate and detailed. In this, as well as in deciding to write what he enjoys writing, Orlando becomes less of a materialist (108). When Orlando, as a woman, explores social life, the realization that she comes to about society is similar to what Woolf claims about materialism in literature: people only ever talk about trivial, mundane, material things, which seem to Orlando irrelevant (188). Also, he no longer

writes as effortlessly and as abundantly: a couple of lines now require an "enormous labour" (109).

By the end of the novel, in the final stage of her artistic development, Orlando perceives effortless writing as unambiguously bad, and is appalled by the moments when words flow easily for her in "cascades of involuntary inspiration" (228). When she reaches the peak of her creative expression, her pen is "wet, but not dripping", words don't come too easily, and she manages to finish her poem, "The Oak Tree" (252).

### 3.3. Post-Impressionism

Woolf was largely influenced and guided by Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist ideas. Praising artists such as Cézanne and Picasso, Fry encourages writers to apply the same approach to literature: to depart from realistic representation in favor of focusing on formal relations and uniting form with meaning. It can be argued that this is precisely what Virginia Woolf was attempting to do (Hawley Roberts 836). The usage of symbolism is at the core of Woolf's literary style. She avoids speaking directly and guiding the reader. Instead, she often presents a symbolic interpretation of reality and leaves it to the reader to find a meaning on their own.

Because of the abstract and symbolic qualities of her work, Lily can easily be categorized as a Post-Impressionist artist. She does not aim for accurate, lifelike portrayal. She thinks of the scene she is observing in terms of shapes, lines, masses, vivid colors, and the composition of lights and shadows, keeping in mind the unity that should result from the interrelations of these components. Her painting represents Mrs. Ramsay and James, mother and child, as a plain purple triangle. Lily's approach to painting seems most reminiscent, among the Post-Impressionist group, of that of Cézanne. Much like him, she assigns a great importance to color and shape: "The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. ... Then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly,

when she looked" (*TL* 16). Cézanne opposed the Impressionists in that he was interested in communicating his vision by capturing the arrangement of forms rather than just the general impression of the scene. Also, much like Lily's scientific thinking when she repeatedly reevaluates the ways to depict the scene in front of her, he analytically questioned what he saw and thought it crucial to depict it faithfully. He famously stated: "I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you." ("Paul Cézanne") Lily's contemplation in places seems to echo this way of thinking: "She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white, since she saw them like that" (16). Moreover, another aspect where Lily's objective coincides with Cézanne's is the impersonal quality of art that they both value: their goal lies not so much in conveying the subject's character, as in expressing a deeper meaning by concentrating on symbolic content, relying upon form and color and their composition in space (49). Lily's painting is imbued with symbols. Other than the obvious facet of geometrical shapes symbolizing real-life subjects, she also adds symbolism to their position and relation to one another on the canvas (49).

#### 3.4. Impersonality

Woolf agrees with Fry's suggestion that, in order to experience a subjective vision of the subject matter, the artist must achieve the state of mind of impersonality. This includes forgetting all material, superficial matters, including money, status and reputation in society, as well as all personal concerns and emotions that are not directly related to the artist's vision. The writer should retain a distance from all the specific, personal facts that compose their self-image. The moment that the artist becomes self-conscious, it affects their work since the vision no longer holds the central focus (Nünning 13). This state of detachment leads, according to Woolf who borrows the expression from Thomas Hardy, to "moments of vision" (Woolf, *NTH* 271). Ideally, the artist should "attain that unconsciousness which means that the consciousness is stimulated to the highest extent." (Woolf, *ONKG* 17)



Woolf's conviction of the necessity of detachment is reflected in her artist characters as well, especially Lily Briscoe. Lily's attempts to eliminate unrelated matters from her mind and achieve impersonality represent the most prominent aspect of her artistic struggle throughout the novel. From the beginning of the novel, she is swarmed by doubts and insecurities that make her unable to focus properly on her creative vision. The first time that Lily's character is introduced, we find her trying to paint but being distracted by Mr. Ramsay who, along with Charles Tansley, remains one of the characters who represent an obstacle in Lily's creative efforts (*TL* 14). Ten years later, standing in the same spot, Mr. Ramsay's presence still makes it impossible for her to paint. "Every time he approached ... ruin approached, chaos approached." (137) She becomes self-conscious in his presence, which makes her unable to create art.

Lily's account of the state of mind which she reaches at last near the end of the novel could serve as an elaboration of Woolf's notion of impersonality and the creative energy that it propels:

"And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance and whether Mr Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modeled it with greens and blues." (147)

Here, Lily manages to discard her self-awareness and let her subconsciousness take over. By forgetting worries concerning herself, she stimulates her mind to fully focus on the act of creation. Several such passages, aside from their more poetic style, seem almost like a continuation of one of Woolf's essays in which she frequently discusses the state of mind necessary for creation, stating, for example, that "there must be no obstacle in it, no foreign

matter" (*ROO* 47); Lily at points even uses the exact expressions used in Woolf's non-fiction to explain impersonality as the desired state of mind.

Miss La Trobe, on the other hand, connects impersonality with anonymity: she feels the need to set her creative endeavors free from all personal facts and issues and separate the two to the extent that neither we as the readers nor the villagers as the audience in the novel learn anything about her background or personal life. In accordance with Woolf's depiction of "the anonymity, in the shadow of which writers write most happily" (Woolf, *NE* 236), Miss La Trobe is persistent to retain her anonymity as an artist, and stays hidden behind a tree during and after the performance to avoid attention.

Impersonality, however, does not mean lack of individuality. Woolf frequently reflects on the subjectivity and individuality of the author's vision, often related to the subjective cultural experience of a person. She also emphasizes that our thoughts are far from being linear or organized as a succession of sentences, and as we experience things as a complexity of seemingly random impressions and associations in our minds, those impressions are very subjective and vary from person to person (Nünning 8). Where the emphasis is put differs from writer to writer, and a matter which is the focus of attention for one will inevitably be completely disregarded by another (*MF* 61). Therefore, although the concept of impersonality, or unconsciousness, can seem to be contrasted to Woolf's approval of subjectivity, it does not oppose it. On the contrary: it implies eliminating from the mind issues that would be a distraction from communicating what the artist is trying to convey.

### 3.5. Woman as the artist and the subject matter of art

One particular aspect of impersonality that Woolf singles out is relation to gender. Firstly, she implies that, ideally, writers should distance themselves from their gender identity: in *The Patron and the Crocus* she advises: "if you can forget your sex altogether ... so much the better; a writer has none" (86), while in *A Room of One's Own* she claims that

androgyny is necessary for artistic creation (89). Secondly, she suggests that distancing from one's material conditions was more difficult for women because of their financial dependence on men at the time, as well as being marked out and discriminated against in the world of literature (Nünning 14).

While men as artists have to overcome the obstacle of the world's indifference, women artists of the time, as Woolf emphasizes, experience not disinterest, but hostility, mainly from men who, wishing to maintain the illusion of their superiority, protest that women are simply not equipped for artistic creation. Since the artist should remain impersonal and resist the urge to preach or protest, this creates a great obstacle in women's artistic process. A potential distraction lies in the strong emotional involvement in reaction to such attitudes and women's task to suppress the bitterness, anger, frustration, hate or fear that it results in is not an easy one. "She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. ... She will write of herself where she should write of her characters." (Woolf, *ROO* 59) This problem of remaining unaffected by men's judgement is well-portrayed in Lily's character. Lily contradicts what she has been taught by society about gender roles, and as a result, she is pressured by men who stop her from fully accomplishing her artistic potential. Distance is what seems to help her overcome the disturbing influence of Mr. Ramsay; that of Charles Tansley, in contrast, is not bound by his physical presence. Early in the novel we learn of his statement that "women can't write, women can't paint." (44) Later on, even in his absence, his words continuously appear and haunt Lily as a voice of insecurity and hesitation in her mind, feeding her doubts and anxieties about her inadequacy as an artist. Simply Tansley's presence, even without any direct interaction, has a tremendous effect on Lily. His silent demand for attention and sympathy overwhelms her and cancels out her confidence in her vision. "She could not see the colour; she could not see the lines" (138). However, the real tyrant that stops Lily from accomplishing what she wants in art perhaps is not a man. Mrs. Ramsay, who has a great

impact on her and fascinates her as a sort of a social artist, shares an opinion similar to her husband's and Tansley's. Her views align with the Victorian stance about women belonging to the domestic sphere. Although she does not imply that women cannot paint, she hints that they should not, or at least not seriously, and dismisses Lily's painting as silly. In doing that, she endorses the view of masculine superiority in the field and the duty of women to act within the frame of the gender roles imposed on them. While Lily fights the condescending allusions about women's place in the domestic sphere, Isa, one of the unaccomplished artists in *Between the Acts*, allows the society's pressure to force her to accept domesticity. The primary reasons that Isa keeps her poetry in private are the social constraints that bind her to such a domestic life and the fear of her husband's reaction to her creative endeavors.

Every person, according to Woolf, contains in themselves something male and something female, and the two need to be harmoniously merged together to make up an androgynous mind capable of creating art (*ROO* 84). This androgynous aspect of the artist, although noticeable in other characters as well, is most obviously explored in the personality of Orlando. When Orlando transforms into a woman, she gets a unique insight into the life of both sexes. She does not have a stable gender identity and, even after becoming a woman, often switches clothes to assume the other gender. Consequently, her androgyny allows her to lessen the "distraction of sex" and achieve impersonality in this aspect (*Orlando* 157, 180).

When it comes to women's art, Woolf accentuates the fact that it had no history or tradition, as well as the fact that, with a growing number of female artists, their interest might lie in "unrecorded things" that had been dismissed as trivial by men while, in the same way, matters that were central to men's attention could go unnoticed by women (*ROO* 63, 79). Only the masculine values, however, are highly valued in society, which presents another challenge for women, ignoring what is imposed to them: "write this, think that." (64) Because of their differing values and points of interest, men's artistic history is of no use to women artists. In

literary history, the vast majority of books about women were written by men. According to Woolf, female characters in such books often served simply to sustain an illusion, magnifying men's confidence in their superiority. Women's relationships were oversimplified and depicted for the most part in relation to men (71). With more female writers, an evolution in the portrayal of women and their relationships to each other was to be expected. Apart from Lily and Mrs. Ramsay exemplifying the novelty of women portraying women, another instance of a new insight into women's relationships is present in *A Room of One's Own*, in which the statement that "Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature" (70) demonstrates the dynamism that the female characters possess when portrayed by other women, as opposed to their role when written by men, which is usually a subjugation to a character used merely as an auxiliary means of characterization of male figures. This example, for Woolf, demonstrates the fact that ways of writing which men have developed as means of expressing their minds are unsuitable for women. Since they have no literary tradition to consult and learn from, women must invent their own devices to communicate what they want (63). Adopting the existing masculine tradition would be a mistake, Woolf argues. "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men" (75). Ideally, combining their own distinct points of interest, androgyny and impersonality, they should write "as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman", which would provide their writing with "that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself." (80) In other words, when writing, women should neither force the feminine qualities which are often imposed on them, nor should they strive for a writing style resembling that of men – they should not be burdened by the question of their gender and its impact on their writing.

### 3.6. Fragmentation and unity

Fragmentation and unity are present on several different levels in Woolf's writing, and the tension between disorder and harmony is prominent in her works. In her literary style,

fragmentation is often manifested in the discontinuity of the plot and the stream of consciousness technique that she uses, as well as in the frequent transitions between different points of view. In her characterization, it exists as the suggestion of the fragmented identity and the idea that a person has many different faces rather than a singular, coherent personality.

As fragmentation is central to her novels, Woolf's writing technique is adapted to expressing it. In her essay *Modern Fiction*, she emphasizes that any method suitable to faithfully express the author's vision is good, and the writing technique should correspond to what the writer is trying to communicate (62). Therefore, aiming to portray the fragmented nature of reality and the daily life, she chooses to represent the inner mental processes of her characters. She wants to record the way in which experiences appear not in the external world, but in human thoughts, where they appear as a sequence of disorganized, fragmented impressions. The human mind, as Woolf notes, is associative and receptive to impressions, and countless impressions are what constitutes our daily life. Orlando experiences the associative, disordered nature of human thoughts and character as well. For example, an ordinary action can stir up his memories, which appear as "a thousand odd, disconnected fragments" (*Orlando* 76). Using the stream of consciousness technique, Woolf wants to mirror the fluid course of human thoughts and emotional experiences, which are inconstant, contradictory, disjointed, and at times repetitive, rather than linear and sensible (*MF* 61). Her prose opposes continuousness in every apparent aspect, and yet, Woolf values unity in works of literature. She believes that a story can be complete and possess unity despite being presented in fragments on the surface. She admires the writers' skill to pick various seemingly disconnected impressions and piece them together in such a way that they form something that, viewed as a whole, is no longer incoherent, but carries a new meaning and is "in obedience to his vision" (63).

This reflection upon the notion of unity and harmony deriving from fragmentation is extended to the characters of Lily and Miss La Trobe. Lily comes to the realization that "life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it" (*TL* 42). Lily is aware of fragments as part of the nature of the human experience, but what she struggles with is bringing those parts together. After Mrs. Ramsay's death, she notices that Mrs. Ramsay was able to achieve such unity in one respect: that she was a unifying force bringing the dispersed personalities together. She achieved something lasting that Lily assimilates to the completeness that a work of art should strive for (149). Perhaps that is part of the reason why she captivates Lily's attention so much, as a figure with the power to bring an integrity to something that is otherwise remote and divided, much like what Lily wants to accomplish in art. Similarly, in Miss La Trobe's play, the English history is enacted in the form of disjointed fragments: chosen historical periods are featured, while others are left out altogether. As it is usual in Woolf's work, Miss La Trobe's idea is that, even though the play is formally discontinuous, it should provide the audience with a sense of unity.

The audience itself represents the contrast between unity and fragmentation. It alternates between being unified in experiencing the play and dispersed in the intervals, followed by music that invites them to assemble again. Both the audience and actors also display a fragmentation in language: at the end of the play, the actors come back on stage to repeat each a fragment of their lines. On the part of the audience, when we hear their reactions after the pageant, rather than witnessing conversations from start to end, we are presented with fragments of them, incoherent and mixed with unrelated pieces of information. As the audience finally departs, a voice from the gramophone warns them: "Dispersed are we; who have come together." (*BA* 100) This might be an attempt to make the members of the audience recognize the unity that existed during the play, and the fact that, although that

particular experience of harmony is over, the possibility of it still exists. Some members' thoughts and comments following the play reflect this idea of harmony despite separateness: "if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?" (102)

A different aspect of fragmentation evident in Woolf's work is that of human identity. In her essay *Street Haunting: A London Adventure* Woolf claims: "Circumstances compel unity; for convenience' sake a man must be a whole." (27) Here Woolf presents the idea that, in spite of our identity really being fragmented, we assume the appearance of being a simple whole for the purposes of the everyday life. Parallel to that, when the members of the audience in Miss La Trobe's play are confronted with their own reflections, they are caught unprepared and, in this sense, in fragments. "Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart ... he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose ... There a skirt ... Then trousers only ... Now perhaps a face. ... Ourselves?" (BA 93) Orlando's and Lily's characters express the idea of the fragmented self as well. Orlando in particular is a character composed of countless different facets. This is perhaps best exemplified by Orlando's androgynous nature (*Orlando* 211), but is also visible from the number of different, often contradictory sides to her personality that make it complex. It accounts for the diverse paths that Orlando takes: the time spent as an ambassador in Constantinople, life with the gypsies, fascination soon followed by aversion towards the social life, and a variety of others (226). She explicitly acknowledges the idea of the existence of innumerable selves in one person when she tries to call upon one particular "Orlando" to take over – the "true self", which is "compact of all the selves we have it in us to be" (296). This is an expression, once again, of Woolf's belief in unity resulting from fragmentation. In the end, Orlando successfully achieves this unity and becomes "a single self, a real self" in which all her diverse selves are integrated (299). Lily recognizes this quality of human personality well, which is evident from her constant preoccupation with the



matter of "knowing people" and her doubts about whether it is achievable at all. She realizes that a person can be seen in many different lights, often contradictory: for example, as she contemplates her "accumulated impressions" of Bankes, it is his "goodness" that stands out, but at the same time she is aware of his many negative qualities. She assumes that even if one considered as much as fifty different perceptions of a person, it still might not result in knowing them (*TL* 184). She frequently recalls various moments that display different faces of Mrs. Ramsay. She is many things all at once: "high handed", authoritative and manipulative, impressive and admirable. Lily wants to show in her painting not one of these multiple aspects and fragments of Mrs. Ramsay, but all of them (165).

In relation to the fragmented nature of the self, Woolf's characters also often acknowledge the ambiguity that exists at the core of all things. For Lily, the idea that no one and nothing is only one thing (which James realizes as well when he decides that both of his opposing perspectives on the lighthouse are, for him, true) is crucial for her art (172). She visualizes her painting as ambiguous: "It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses." (158) For Orlando, ambiguity is a characteristic of reality; she observes the multi-faceted nature of people, gender, friendship, love, beauty, truth, society, nature and poetry (*Orlando* 138). Moreover, she links this ever-present ambivalence to the accumulated diversity of impressions and associations due to different experiences over time. "Nothing is any longer one thing. I take up a handbag and I think of an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice. Someone lights a pink candle and I see a girl in Russian trousers." (290) As for *Between the Acts*, it highlights the idea that everything is a matter of subjective perception and interpretation; each of the spectators had a different perception of the play. "They all looked at the play; Isa, Giles and Mr. Oliver. Each of course saw something different." (*BTA* 108)

### 3.7. The role of the audience

Audience, for Woolf, is an important factor in the process of creating art and deciding on the targeted audience determines how the work is created. It is impossible, she argues, to successfully create art in isolation because "writing is a method of communication; and the crocus is an imperfect crocus until it has been shared." (*PC* 85) A similar thought about the necessity of an audience is expressed by Lily, who believes that the love that poets have for their writing "was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain" (*TL* 43), but also by Orlando who, upon finishing her poem, declares that it must be read. Orlando believes that "words written are shared" and several times reflects upon the imperfection, but also necessity of human communication (*Orlando* 140). Literature, for Orlando, is "the vehicle of our message" that writers and poets need to aspire to perfect so that they can use words to closely reflect their thoughts and their artistic vision (166). Art, then, is an exchange in which the two sides, the artist and the audience, are interdependent, and the artist should neither lecture nor exalt the audience, but perceive them as equal (*PC* 87). Woolf assigns the readers almost the position of co-authors, and Miss La Trobe does this in a more literal way: she attempts to assign the audience the role of a participant in her play when she uses their reflection in mirrors to represent the present time society. Woolf advises carefully choosing the targeted audience: the audience that the artist has in mind when creating the work should be familiar with literature of different cultures and times, not be shocked easily, and be able to recognize cultural influences (86). Lily follows this advice: she would not let Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, Paul Riley, Minta Doyle, or "practically anybody else" see her painting, except for William Bankes (*TL* 15). Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley especially, in her eyes, are tyrants, wishing to assert themselves as superior and subdue her, which makes them an unsatisfactory audience. She chooses Bankes as a much more appropriate audience: he never condescends Lily. In fact, she refers to Bankes and herself as "allies" (15); "alliance" is also

the word that Woolf uses to describe the ideal relationship between the author and the reader (*PC* 87).

As the creator of the play, Miss La Trobe values her audience, even though in a moment of rejection of her ideas by the shocked audience she deplors it as a burden, exclaiming: "O to write a play without an audience – the play." (*BA* 138) The terminology that she uses to describe the relationship between her audience, "the devil" (138) and herself, "the slave of my audience" (160) when she fears their refusal to participate greatly differs from the ideal of a happy alliance described by Woolf. Everything in her production is subdued to her audience and her attempts to share her vision with them. From the beginning of the play this proves a constant struggle, as exemplified by the fact that a lot of the time the audience is not able to hear the actors.

Another example of artistic creation failing to be a means of communication is the poetry of Isa. Not only is Isa unwilling to share her poetry, but what stands out about her in relation to other characters is the failure to communicate. There are numerous instances that illustrate her frustrating inability to connect. She is annoyed by Lucy and Bart repeating the same meaningless conversation about the pageant every year (19). Her attempts to greet her children repeatedly go unnoticed (13, 26). She never speaks to her husband in the entire novel. However, an exception is William Dodge, the only person with whom Isa successfully communicates, who unintentionally becomes an audience to some of her poetic ramblings. When Dodge hears her mumbling poetry, it initially causes in her discomfort and anxiety; she feels her privacy is invaded. However, with Dodge privately being fond of art as well, this develops into a connection between them. "He smiled. She smiled. They were conspirators; each murmuring some song my uncle taught me." (56)

#### 4. Conclusion

If we observe Woolf's essays, which contain an aesthetics subtly expressed through criticism of diverse literary works, and compare it to her works of fiction, which feature characters who perceive art as a steady point in the otherwise unreliable nature of life, it is easy to notice that she uses her novels as an endorsement as well as a medium for further contemplation of her ideas about artistic creation through the experience of her fictional characters, who frequently use the same terminology found in Woolf's essays.

There is much more in common to the central characters of the three novels discussed here than my initial observation of their gender as a peculiarity for a *Künstlerroman*. All of these characters echo to different extents aspects of Woolf's approach to art and her aesthetics: all of their artistic ideas originate from the need to communicate a personal inner vision; they all reject certain traditional aspects of artistic creation in favor of progressive thinking, experimentation and innovation; they all want their artistic processes to be separated from personal emotions and concerns while also battling oppression of society because of its imposed expectations; all of them come to the same conclusion about the fragmented nature of the human experience, mind and personality, but strive at the same time for accomplishing unity; finally, all of them understand art as a process of communication which requires an audience.

It is also evident from the insight we have into the characters' minds thanks to Woolf's stream of consciousness technique that a large part of her fiction focuses on the characters that could be described as struggling artists. They perceive art as a constant struggle. As they attempt to find their identity as an artist and accomplish a satisfactory expression through a work of art, they encounter difficulties due to various reasons. If we observe the position of these characters in their novels, we can notice that the novel usually follows their artistic process and ends when they successfully express their vision in the form of a finished piece of

art. One of the obstacles common to all Woolf's artists considered in this paper is the difficulty of ignoring distractions of the outside world. Another ever-present impediment are gender issues related to conventional feminine and masculine roles in society and the duty of domestic life for women. By the end of the novel, the artist in Woolf's novels in most cases has overcome the issues and completed the work of art.

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## 6. List of abbreviations

BA	Between the Acts
MBMB	Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown
MF	Modern Fiction
NE	The Niece of Earl
NTH	The Novels of Thomas Hardy
ONKG	On Not Knowing Greek
PC	The Patron and the Crocus
ROO	A Room of One's Own
TL	To the Lighthouse

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST IN THE WORK OF VIRGINIA WOOLF: Summary and key words

Summary: This paper examines the image of the artist which can be derived from the works of Virginia Woolf, taking into consideration various essays by Woolf as well as three of her novels: *To the Lighthouse*, *Between the Acts* and *Orlando*. These three novels feature artist characters – Lily Briscoe, Miss La Trobe, Isa and Orlando – representing diverse forms of creative expression. Through an analysis of traits common to these characters, an emphasis is put on different aspects of the portrayal of the artist figure.

Key words: Virginia Woolf, artist, Modernism, Post-Impressionism, vision, impersonality, woman artist, androgyny, fragmentation, audience.

PRIKAZ UMJETNICE U DJELIMA VIRGINIJE WOOLF: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Sažetak: Ovaj se rad bavi slikom umjetnice koja se može izvesti iz djela Virginije Woolf, uzimajući u obzir njezine razne eseje i tri romana: *K svjetioniku*, *Između činova* i *Orlando*. Ova tri romana sadrže likove umjetnica – Lily Briscoe, Gospođa La Trobe, Isa i Orlando – koji predstavljaju različite oblike kreativnog izražavanja. Kroz analizu svojstava zajedničkih Woolfičinim likovima umjetnika, stavlja se naglasak na različite aspekte njihova prikaza.

Ključne riječi: Virginia Woolf, umjetnik, modernizam, postimpresionizam, vizija, impersonalnost, žena umjetnica, androginija, fragmentarnost, publika.