

Virginia Woolf's Vision of Love

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'What is love ?' What is it to be in love ?' These questions from time to time crop up in the consciousness of the central characters of Virginia Woolf's novels, in particular, those of her early novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*. This time old literary subject, love, is a preoccupation also with this author, but what is significant with her is that, as in the case of her inquiries into the meaning of life, death, and reality, she rejects all the 'visionary voices' which have dressed up their own images of love, and faithful to her own principle that 'the only truth which she could discover was the truth of what she herself felt,' she has, in her search after the truths about this subject, followed the light of her own insight—'a frail beam when compared with the broad illumination shed by the eyes of all the people who are in agreement to see together.'¹⁾ These quotations from *Night and Day* signify the guiding principle of Katharine Hilbery in the process of finding her bearing in her confused relationship with her two lovers, but this principle may be taken to be that of the author herself in her search for her own bearings as an individual and an artist. The conclusion that Katharine reached temporarily, that the relationship between the lives which 'instead of running parallel, had suddenly intersected each other'²⁾ can be explained only in the light of love, and that there is in each relation something unique and something not to be passed by, becomes very significant when we consider the kind of treatment Mrs. Woolf gives to her materials for her stories of love, a fine distinction between the different modes of love, based on keen observations and intellectual speculation. Her efforts at inquiry into the nature of love seem to be sustained in the two novels mentioned above, where they are expended on analyses and sketches characterized by a subtlety that is not often to be found even in the novels of our time. In her later novels the emphasis is on for her the more profound issues of life, but a keen awareness of the significance of love and the part it plays in the life of man seems always to be present.

Love as is seen by this author is presented to us in its numerous aspects. As if to demonstrate the words of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, 'love had a thousand shapes,'³⁾ she almost runs the whole gamut of this feeling both in her careful analyses and in her brief sketches. She even gives us glimpses into the impulses behind the

inverted form of love between man and man, and woman and woman. The purpose of this short paper, however, is not a cataloguing of these various aspects of love, but an attempt to find out, out of all the impressive pictures and sketches of love she has drawn, a conception of love which appears to be unique with this author and in keeping with her view of life and art.

Love in its incipient state is referred to by Mrs. Woolf as a 'little spark of life' 'that wants not advice but intimacy, and is always trying to work through to other people' and is 'always being rebuffed.'⁴⁾ By introducing it as something that 'rejects advice,' she has already made half known what she sees as the truth about love as is commonly understood to exist between two individuals. This 'little spark of life,' once inflamed and fed, will sooner or later develop into a 'devastating fire which melts the whole being into one mountain torrent.' Engulfed by this torrent, the lovers, with a desire only to possess each other completely, will join in a conspiracy against the world. All interest in the world around them will be smothered, and there will arise a need for them to resort to lies and hypocrisy. Mrs. Woolf likens this state of being to that of the religious fanatic, who, like Miss Kilman in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is set on gaining a complete victory over the soul of another.

'Love and religion ! How detestable they are, clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel !'⁵⁾

Love at this stage can be cruel, brutal, and devastating. With but a slight turn in the scale, it can become converted to hatred. Mrs. Woolf admits this with respect to the relationship between Mrs. Dalloway and Miss Kilman.

'With another throw of the dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she would have loved Miss Kilman !'⁶⁾

We see here introduced Mrs. Woolf's view of the duality of the emotion between two individuals drawn mutually in compact, love that is hatred and hatred that is love. This insight of hers into the true nature of what is generally understood to be love is given full play in the portrayal of Susan in *The Waves*. Her personality is summed up from first to last with the catch words, 'I love, I hate.' As against Bernard who is 'preserved from excesses of feeling,'⁷⁾ and strives rather towards loving mankind as a whole (aware at the same time of the futility of loving mankind), Susan has only one desire, to love and to spare none for the protection of her love. When she says, 'I love with such ferocity that it kills me when the object of my love shows by a phrase that he can escape,'⁸⁾ her love is almost indistinguishable from hatred. This hatred that is 'the underside of love'⁹⁾ has been pointed out by Jean Guiguet as something apparent in the relations between the characters of nearly all of her novels. It is sensed by him as being existent in the relationship

between even Katharine and Ralph of *Night and Day*, whose love, as we will see later, is viewed in an entirely different light by Mrs. Woolf. The severity of her criticism of people enwrapped in this kind of affection is apparent from the frequency with which she deals with it as well as from her tone, but it seems also to be suggested that even people of her own temperament cannot altogether escape it. Even if one can escape it, or rather, if he is incapable of it, due to something innate in him, like Hirst of *The Voyage Out*, it will not bring happiness. Behind the critical eye, there is a lonely heart that is lamenting its own fate.

The simplicity, self-satisfaction, and egoism that are inevitable in this kind of love are what cannot be tolerated by the highly intelligent, and sensitive Hirst. He can see 'the little vices and deceits and flaws of life,' 'the inferior nature of the love between man and woman.'¹⁰⁾ He despises lovers for being made happy so simply and 'sees nothing romantic or exciting about that state which is for him as dull as anything else.'¹¹⁾ Hirst, however, is never happy. 'To be simple, to be able to say simply what one felt.....that would be worth almost any other gift, for it made one happy.'¹²⁾ He who despises and pities others for being made happy so simply by love is in turn to be pitied for his lack of capacity for this simple emotion and therefore for happiness. We find in his voice the author's acknowledgment of the loneliness of one whose nature is so framed that it is impossible for him to abandon himself to this kind of emotion that brings happiness, inferior or not.

Mrs. Woolf looks on this aspect of love in another light through the eyes of Hewet, another character of *The Voyage Out*, the one who is pitied by his friend Hirst for his love for Rachel. If somewhat inferior to Hirst in intelligence, Hewet is almost as wide awake to the conditions that attend the state of being in love. Not only is he aware of its abhorrent egoism and smugness, but he is also conscious of something horribly pathetic about it. As he visualizes his married life with Rachel, he sees a series of pictures that foretell not all happiness but also pathos. Two people, 'leaving the company to steal to happiness,' 'sitting alone over the fire,'¹³⁾ 'glancing at each other as though content to let something pass unquestioned,' people in this condition are for him vulnerable in a world so full of danger and unrest. It is as though these people, instead of being at the zenith of happiness, are faced with a crisis of their lives. It is this keen sense of the plight of those in love that arouses his pity for his own love with Rachel. Self pity of this kind, greatly impairs one's sense of pride, one's dignity as an independent human being, but it seems to be particularly strong in Mrs. Woolf, as we can tell by the vehemence with which she speaks for the cause of women rendered vulnerable in a man-made society, and by her dislike, as we find expressed in her diary, of the physicalness attendant upon womanhood, i. e. childbirth. Hewet, with his subtle awareness of the pitiable condition of men and women in love, seems to be a reflection of this

sensibility of the author. Love, as we have seen above, is to be pitied for its vulnerability, as well as despised for its simplicity, egoism, and brutality.

Hewet's sense of the pathos of the state of being in love and in wedlock is heightened as he realizes further that the most individual and humane of his friends are bachelors and spinsters. Even Mrs. Ambrose who is respected by him and Hirst is a disappointment when regarded in the light of her relationship with her husband. 'She who is all truth to others is not true to her husband.'¹⁴⁾ This falsity is the condition for the coexistence of two independent souls. It appears that without it there would remain nothing to uphold the relationship. This compromise, moreover, tends to bring out what is worst in each other, and for Hewet, seems to be worse for women than for men.

It is worse in that it brings out, as said before, the falsity of women, but Mrs. Woolf views this falsity in another light in her later novels, and reveals to us the finer qualities of this inferior form of love. The relationship, for example, between the Ramsays in *To the Lighthouse*, described symbolically as 'the pure joy of two notes sounding together,'¹⁵⁾ is overshadowed by the need for Mrs. Ramsay to be untruthful to herself in order to preserve their love, but if the joy is diminished for the falsity, the relationship itself reflects a warmth that seems to emanate from the heart of the author. This sympathy is said to have been evoked by the memories of the relationship between her father and mother, and seems to have flowered into that beautiful and impressive presentation of love in the form of compromise.

Mrs. Woolf, however, has her own ideal concerning love between the different sexes, and this can be found underlying the relationship of Rachel and Hewet of *The Voyage Out* and Katharine and Ralph of *Night and Day*.

Rachel, unlike Susan Warrington, a minor character of the same novel, does not belong to the type of women who are thrown into an ecstasy of satisfaction with their acquisition of love and are delighted 'to join the ranks of the married women.'¹⁶⁾ On the contrary, she experiences a dislike for such a condition. Yet she is at times overcome by the ecstatic and mysterious mood attendant upon the state of being in love, and is unwittingly concentrated into 'a single spark' by her love for Hewet. This annoys Hewet, much as he worships her for the fine qualities of her spirit. 'Being engaged had not that effect on him. He still wanted the things he had always wanted.'

Rachel, however, is not to remain long in that pitiable condition. The influence of her lover, her associations with Hirst and Mrs. Ambrose, remarkable for their enlightened views on life and the personality, her observations of the captives of that 'ecstatic and mysterious thing,' love, and above all, the qualities of her superior mind assist in bringing her into a relationship with Hewet most congenial to her independent spirit. She becomes able to share with her lover a state of being in which the two can be very close and intimate with each other and yet calm,

detached, and disinterested. In that condition the world seen by them is 'solid' and 'entire,' 'large' and 'hospitable,' and the independence of their souls remains as intact as ever. A new feeling is experienced which is far more preferable to the ecstatic and mysterious. As Lily Briscoe puts it, the universe seen through the eyes of love is 'penetrating and exciting but unreal,'¹⁸⁾ whereas the world of this new feeling is real, where 'even the ordinary is lovable.'¹⁹⁾ If effort is needed to uphold this state, the effort itself is a delight not a struggle. 'Now she wants many more things than the love of one human being.'²⁰⁾ It would seem that this magnanimous frame of mind is no longer what one may call the love of man for woman. It seems to be akin to the outlook on life of some of her characters like Bernard of *The Waves*, who, with his open mind, unbiased views, calm and detached bearing, is endowed with the power to embrace the world, nature and all, and to bear down on this world 'with benignity.'²¹⁾ It also reminds us of that state of being Mrs. Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own* and other essays, as being requisite for an artist's sure grasp of reality, the mind unencumbered and broadened by a multiplicity of perspectives. One in this state is able to move freely in his world of imagination; he is able to see clearly what is around him, and to set it against a larger background to see its significance in the whole scheme of things. He is not hindered in his flight by extremes of emotion or by ties with alien personalities. It would seem that such a condition would not admit of an intimate human relationship. Yet Rachel and Hewet feel comfort in their closeness. 'Merely to be close soothed them.'²²⁾ 'They had ceased to be separate bodies,' and 'there seemed to be peace between them.'²³⁾ Mrs. Woolf herself admits that this was 'not the love of man for woman, of Terence for Rachel' but that perhaps 'this too was love.'²⁴⁾ If this too is love, it is a kind of love that has little to do with the impulses of human beings. If it is not love based on impulses, it is also not the worship of another's soul as the one reality in the world. It may be called a partnership, as it were, between two very intelligent and sensitive people, in the exploration of life, reality, and their own possibilities. In what manner these two souls are to preserve their independence within so close a union as mapped out for them we are not made to know, for in this novel death is soon to separate them. No sooner had they arrived at that state of being which admitted of the coexistence of their independent spirits than death was to prevent them from a further confirmation of the solidity of their union. Deprived of a companion whose worth he had come to appreciate, Hewet is overcome at first with the greatness of his loss. Yet out of despair there gradually emerges a consciousness that now the union has become perfect. 'They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived.'²⁴⁾

Ralph Denham and Katharine Hilbery, of Mrs. Woolf's next novel, *Night and Day*, after an alternation of mutual attraction and repulsion and seizures of unbridled

passion, finally arrive at a state of spiritual communion, similar to that experienced by Rachel and Hewet. Katharine whose nature was so constituted that she had wished that 'no one in the whole world would think of her,' and had 'dressed up an image of love that dwarfed any examples that came her way' experiences in her relationship with Ralph a feeling that she had not experienced before. 'No feeling of annoyance with Denham remained. He did not hinder any flight she might choose to make. That her condition was due to him she had not consciousness.'²⁵⁾ On the other hand, Ralph who is another lonely and independent soul, uncompromising and restrained in his relations with the people around him, is, in Katharine's presence, in full possession of his powers, and has complete mastery of his faculties. He then had 'none of the restlessness or feverish desire to add one delight to another which had hitherto marked the most rapturous of his imaginings.'²⁷⁾ It was a frame of mind that 'took such clear-eyed account of the condition of human life that he was not disturbed in the least by the gliding presence of a taxi-cab, and without agitation he perceived that Katharine was conscious of it also.' He now enjoys a condition in which he can give full play to his power of feeling and perception. In this utmost fullness of communion 'no feelings are to be considered, no obligations allowed to grow up' although 'there should be perfect sincerity.'²⁸⁾ It is as though there is now no relationship between the two. At this point we are made aware of the irony of the author's conception, the utmost fullness of communion reached at a state where there is little or no relationship between two individuals. But that seems to be what she visualizes as the ideal condition of love between two persons if they are to preserve their integrity.

There is one thing that the two can share and that is a vision of 'another world independent of personal affairs, a world of law, of philosophy such has (Ralph) had had a glimpse of.....when together they seemed to be sharing something, creating something, an ideal—a vision flung out in advance of (their) actual circumstances. If this golden rim were quenched, if life were no longer circled by an illusion (but was it an illusion after all ?) then it would be too dismal an affair to carry to the end.'²⁹⁾ In their separate moments the two made flights into their world independent of personal affairs, Katharine into her world of algebraic symbols and things that didn't exist, the forest, the ocean beach, the leafy solitudes, the magnanimous hero, and Ralph on his imaginative voyage through ice and black water, but now together they have arrived at a stage when they can 'step over the threshold into the faintly lit vastness of another mind'³⁰⁾ and there see a common vision. In *The Voyage Out* there is no mention made of the vision that the two lovers are to share once their union is achieved, but here Mrs. Woolf has given a finishing touch to her picture by suggesting the nature of the experiences they are to have in that relationship, a pursuit after truths beyond our understanding which

savors of mysticism.

In *The Voyage Out*, death makes perfect and permanent the love between Rachel and Hewet, but in *Night and Day*, the love between the hero and heroine is made to persevere in the face of diverse obstacles. On the surface of the story there is a vestige of social barrier that has to be broken down, and some sort of friction caused by this, but the real and significant obstacle seems to be the very nature of the union which can be achieved only in the most rarefied moments of their existence, and the precariousness of the balance between two such characters, essentially very independent and lonely, unreserved only when left to themselves, and with a relentless faithfulness to their own views of life and love. Thus the frequency of the lapses that threaten the relationship between Katharine and Ralph. The depth of the despair revealed at these moments leaves a far more lasting impression on us than the fullness of communion that is achieved finally at the end of the novel. It makes us doubt the truth of the emotions or passion of Ralph and Katharine for each other as well as the strength of the compact between the two. Speaking of truth, we seem to find more of it in the other side of the story, that is, in the relationship between Ralph and Mary Datchet.

Mary Datchet, a woman of clear insight and considerable ability loves Ralph sincerely but has enough sense and pride not to accept him when he offers to marry her although he is strongly attracted by Katharine. The waves of exaltation and emotion for Ralph that surge up in her under the influence of the moment, the sound judgment that brings her back to a calm evaluation of the nature of her love and her position, the stubborn respect for her own dignity that forbades surrender in spite of her emotion, all this is presented to us with such clear insight and cogency that we feel that Mary is the most realized of all the characters, not only of *Night and Day*, but of both the early novels. There is an aloofness in the personality of Katharine that tends to undermine our belief in the reality of her feelings, but Mary, in spite of her firm and resolute temperament, is from time to time shown as being extremely sensitive and capable of deep natural feelings. Circumstances force her to give up her love and to turn her attention forever to her cause—women's suffrage. She then appears to have conquered her weakness and reached a state where she can celebrate her independence of the tyranny of love. Yet, we are given glimpses of her suffering the pain of her loss, a loss that 'nothing would ever make up—not success, or happiness, or oblivion.'³¹⁾ This makes us feel the flesh and blood in the texture of her being, and the reality of her love for Ralph.

Katharine's voice seems to ring truest not when she is supposedly at the height of her ecstasy with love fulfilled, but when pressed earlier for a solution of her complicated relationship with the people who love her, she resolves to maintain 'a

position of absolute and fearless independence³²⁾ by which she can 'best serve the people who loved', a position which seems to be more in keeping with a temperament such as hers. It is thus easier for us to see the reality of the love of Mary that is unrequited than that of the love of Katharine that is finally fulfilled. The curtain drops with the latter in a state of profound happiness, but judging from what has taken place before and the essential nature of these two lovers, this final scene seems to be laden with more gloomy forebodings.

To go back, however, to her relation with Ralph, we feel that theirs is a very different kind of love from that which is understood to exist between two individuals in love. If there is one example in actual life that we can conceive of, it is the relationship between the author herself and her husband Leonard Woolf. So far as we can learn from her diary, there seem to be between them a similar fullness of communion, a similar community of outlook, interest, taste, and similar feelings of mutual reverence, although there is nothing to suggest their partaking of the mystic's experience.

In her later novels, Mrs. Woolf is never again to deal directly with this kind of love. It is as if, by developing in the early novels her notion of an ideal form of love, she has first set up a standard. Against this standard she seems to have set the kind of relationships she is later to develop, the love between the Dalloways and the Ramsays, which is a form of compromise but is nonetheless based firmly on faith, or the love between Mrs. Dalloway and Peter Welsh that all but reaches the ideal but is hindered by some inferior qualities in one or both of the parties concerned. What seems to be common to all these relations is that it is the female whose integrity is threatened by the egoism or passion of the male, and that it is the male that is pictured as helpless, needing all the comfort and sympathy of the female in order to secure the foothold of his precarious existence. While the male's attention is tied down to what is more or less immediate to him, it is the female who sees visions flung out 'in advance of their actual circumstances,' who, like Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, is able to stand back from life and from what is directly before them to set it against 'a waste of waters,' to borrow the phrase of Bernard, that is, to see it in its relation with life, death and reality.

Jean Guiguet has pointed out that this defiant belief in women's superiority in the quest for truth can be seen as a certain bias of this author, but when she shows us such a character like Bernard in *The Waves*, it may be said that her choice of female characters for such parts in the two novels is merely accidental. It seems also to be suggested that these characters, Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay, Bernard, have themselves come through, like Katharine, great passion, love foiled, or love fulfilled, or they may know or feel it without having learnt. They have come to know that their secret knowledge of life is something that cannot be

imparted to or shared by others. They are seen to be truest to their nature in their position of 'absolute and fearless independence, by which they can best serve those who love.' They appear to be the answer to the question Mrs. Woolf has raised with the love stories of Rachel and Hewet and Katharine and Ralph : 'Is it possible for one to achieve with another a complete union in love and yet to preserve the integrity of his soul ?'

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- 1) *Night and Day*, London, 1950, p.330.
- 2) *ibid.*, p.331.
- 3) *To the Lighthouse*, London, 1964, p.218.
- 4) *The Voyage Out*, London, 1949, p.306.
- 5) *Mrs. Dalloway*, London, 1950, p.139.
- 6) *ibid.*, p.14.
- 7) *The Waves*, London, 1931, p.264.
- 8) *ibid.*, p.143.
- 9) *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, Jean Guiguet, London, 1965, p.324.
- 10) *The Voyage Out*, p.381.
- 11) *ibid.*, p.340.
- 12) *ibid.*, p.294.
- 13) *The Voyage Out*, p.294.
- 14) *ibid.*, p.296.
- 15) *To the Lighthouse*, p.46.
- 16) *The Voyage Out*, p.162.
- 17) *The Voyage Out*, p.360.
- 18) *To the Lighthouse*, p.55.
- 19) *The Voyage Out*, p.356.
- 20) *ibid.*, p.370.
- 21) *The Waves*, 132.
- 22) *The Voyage Out*, p.371.
- 23) *ibid.*, p.385.
- 24) *The Voyage Out*, p.431.
- 25) *Night and Day*, p.107.
- 26) *ibid.*, p.317.
- 27) *ibid.*, p.318.
- 28) *Night and Day*, p.357.
- 29) *ibid.*, p.515.
- 30) *ibid.*, p.534.
- 31) *Night and Day*, p.478.
- 32) *Night and Day*, p.332.