



ACTED AND UNACTED PARTS

The Quest for Identity in Virginia Woolf's Novels

Florentina TAYLOR

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Lumen

Iași 2012

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*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter...*

John Keats
Ode on a Grecian Urn
(1820)

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The turn of the last century was marked by an acute identity crisis resulting from decisive economical and socio-political changes. Consequently, the concept of *self* started to be represented in literature as fluctuating and fragile, from a subjective and limited narrative perspective. Crystallising in her novels the image of the frustrated individual who is never pleased with his/ her life, Virginia Woolf hailed the modern ascendancy of illusion over reality. Each of her characters appears to suffer from a *self deprivation*, and this makes them all search for alternate egos – *unacted parts*, that is (a recurrent phrase appearing in several of the novels discussed). Instead of enjoying their lives as they are, these characters prefer to imagine what *could have happened*, had there been chance. They are actors performing one role after another, but they never find the happiness they pursue, nor do they ever manage to discover their true identity. However, their final frustration and solitude characterise in fact all of us, because, histrionic and superficial as they may be, they are nonetheless live and credible.

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Introduction

The expansion of the human horizon, with all its experience, knowledge and ideas – a process initiated in the sixteenth century – is increasingly accelerated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to such an extent that all over the world it generates severe adaptation crises that are extremely difficult to surpass. This is how Erich Auerbach¹ accounts for the identity crisis that characterises the individual of the last century, and Jacques Le Rider² seconds him, explaining that the economic and socio-political modernity of the 1900s brought about serious difficulties regarding both collective and subjective identification. The human self started to be marked by instability, fragility and solitude, Le Rider adds.

It is the moment when *the reflection of multiple consciousnesses*³ appears as a narrative device in literature, and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is one of the novelists who applied it effectively and extensively, especially through her experiments with the *stream of consciousness* technique. The instability, fragility and solitude of the social background are thus transferred into fiction, since the classical omniscient narrator gives place to a narrative entity that always doubts, questions, hesitates, searches and supposes, as if they did not know their characters better than the reader does. The writers who adopt this method – Woolf among them – seem to be afraid of imposing on life and their topic an order that the world does not actually contain, Auerbach ventures. Characters are, therefore, regarded from the inside, since the classical exterior authority is now replaced by subjectivity.

¹ Auerbach, 1953: 549-550

² Le Rider, 1990: 5; 27

³ Auerbach, 1953: 549

It is to be expected that a writer who was continually pestered by questions such as ‘*Who am I?*’ and ‘*What am I?*’⁴ should produce characters of a similar nature, and it is indeed so. All Virginia Woolf’s novelistic characters have problems of identification, their identity being so fluctuating that they rarely know for sure who they are. They are not round, complete characters; on the contrary, as Kathleen Wheeler⁵ posits, they are unfinished, they are perpetually struggling to develop, to understand themselves and the world they live in. ‘*It is almost as if identity itself becomes “the thing that exists when we aren’t there”*’, Laura Marcus⁶ wittily comments.

Woolf’s characters appear indeed to be interested only in the identity that *is not* identity, namely in what they might have been, rather than in what they actually are. ‘*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter*’, John Keats wrote⁷, and this seems to be the motto all of them chose for their lives. Superficial and histrionic as they are, they resemble some actors who reluctantly act their real parts, with their minds wandering in the realm of the *unacted parts*, of the roles they could have played, had certain conditions been fulfilled.

In this frame of reference, the present book analyses the behaviour of Woolf’s characters in certain stereotypical circumstances that I considered to be relevant to the writer’s novels. Accordingly, I first explored family and group relationships from the point of view of intrinsic identity – that is, from the inherent gender perspective and the implications it has

⁴ cf. Woolf, 1953: 86

⁵ Wheeler, 1997: 94

⁶ Marcus, 1997: 133

⁷ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820) – cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (electronic format), Oxford University Press, 1999

in a patriarchal society. I labelled as *extrinsic identity* people's external identification in terms of vocation, and here I looked at the erudite and charitable masks some of the characters wear in society and the artist's perpetual pursuit of an evanescent vision. The characters who waver between alternative identities have been surveyed in the third chapter, and seemingly interesting conjectures followed concerning those who identify themselves with other people or even with mother nature. Stepping into the characters' innermost subjectivity, I analysed the way they perceive their body and mind and the extent to which the two seem to be connected. At the opposite end, the final chapter – whose title is a celebrated quotation paraphrased by Richard Jenkins⁸ – looks into the impressions that characters give one another and the image they try to convey by means of clothing and language.

The foremost verdict that proceeds from all this investigation is the fact that the prevalent proclivity for *unacted parts* brings Woolf's characters only frustration and disappointment. Since they '*are always wanting something they can't get*', as Terence Hewet (*The Voyage Out*) accurately senses⁹, they can never be satisfied either with themselves or with one another. Choosing to relinquish what has been given to them for the sake of what they *might* get, they wittingly condemn themselves to solitude and anguish.

⁸ The paraphrase appears several times in Jenkins's 1996 book.

⁹ Woolf, 1915: 220

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Chapter One

Intrinsic Identity

Either from biographical reasons, from causes that belong to the metamorphic process of writing, or – rather – from both, Virginia Woolf's novels display an attitude that apparently fringes misandry. They are overshadowed by the male type of the Victorian chauvinist, whose contempt covers – with few exceptions – both woman and child. The result is for all the characters – men, women and children – solitude, disappointment and thorough unhappiness. In the attempt to find a solution to this crisis, all of them resort to illusion: instead of assuming their natural roles in reality, instead of trying to change its unpleasant aspects, they indulge in imagining alternative parts that they *could have played* in their lifetime. These are, by all means, more rewarding for someone who refuses to accept reality as it is, but they ultimately lead to lack of contact with real life. When *unacted parts* take the place of the *acted* ones, life is but a play and people but ludicrous puppets drawn to and fro by their own imagination.

1.1. The Man

Brutal, grumpy, frustrated, apprehensive, feeling that they are threatened by inevitable failure, the men in Virginia Woolf's novels seem to find two solutions for escaping this awkward situation. On the one hand, they bear a fierce contempt to women, programmatically considering them inferior, but – at the same time – demanding from them wholehearted and unswerving sympathy. On the other hand, in order to appear much better than they actually are, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of other people, they boast, show off and blow their importance out of all proportion. However, the only perceptible result is the fact

that they develop an inner sense of utter and unspeakable loneliness, which takes them back to grumpiness, frustration and apprehension.

The first instance of male disdain for women is connected to the female intellect, and St John Hirst's opinion (*The Voyage Out*) seems to be emblematic for his 'peers' too. Talking to Rachel Vinrace, he asks her: '*You see, the problem is, can one really talk to you? Have you got a mind, or are you like the rest of your sex?*', and later he asks the girl's aunt whether Rachel is able to reason, or she is '*merely a kind of footstool*'¹⁰. It is odd to see that Jacob Flanders (*Jacob's Room*) is preoccupied by the very same question – Does Florinda have a mind, or is she utterly brainless¹¹? – although the reader will see, several pages on, that she was good enough to get into his bed all the same. North Pargiter (*The Years*) curses his own sister, Peggy, for belonging to this damned species of unbearable unimaginative creatures, and Mr Ramsay (*To the Lighthouse*) is no exception, he too sighing as he muses on the bleak vagueness of women's intellect, who – in his opinion – cannot keep anything fixed in their minds. Ramsay's young friend, Charles Tansley, has the strong belief that women make civilisation impossible with their silliness, and he goes on whispering to Lily Briscoe (who, as we know, is a painter) that women can neither write nor paint¹². Then again, William Rodney (*Night and Day*) strongly recommends Katharine Hilbery to marry (that is, to marry **him**, but this is a subsidiary issue, and he himself seems to brush it aside innocently), because he considers that women are nothing at all outside marriage, men being the ones who really render them worthy of living.

¹⁰ Woolf, 1915: 153; 207

¹¹ Woolf, 1922: 57; 58

¹² Woolf, 1927: 54

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I would like to dedicate this book, with all my gratitude to the teachers at Transilvania University (Brasov, Romania) who have changed my life for ever, offering me perspectives I would never have dreamt of, and who - yes - taught me how to use commas correctly. :o)

Floretina Taylor is a qualified translator, interpreter and teacher of English, with a keen interest in the works of Virginia Woolf. She has a B.A. (HONS) degree in English - Romanian from Transilvania University Brasov and is currently studying at the University of Exeter UK, where she has been offered a special scholarship for the Med - TESOL programme.

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