

**What kind of life-writing emerges from Virginia Woolf's essays?**

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*'From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art' (Woolf 85)*

In my essay, I aim to display the points of connection, and notable contradiction, between *Moments of Being*, 'On Being Ill,' and Woolf's letters and diary extracts that have been most quoted and discussed by academics. The connecting points are Woolf's contemplation of shame, early memories of her mother, Julia Stephen, and early memories of experiencing bliss in nature. I will discuss these connections with reference to Freud's theory of screen memories. The notable contradiction I will attempt to display is between two of Woolf's portrayals of her father, Leslie Stephen. To understand this contradiction, I will utilise Freud's concept of childhood ambivalence.

Screen memories are Freud's theory that memories are not recalled from childhood but formed about childhood. Freud describes the memories unconsciously selected to be turned into screen memories as having "aroused some powerful emotion or which, owing to their consequences, had been recognized as important soon after their occurrence." (305) This type is useful as an approach to the memories Woolf relates of her mother, Julia Stephen, in 'Sketch'. Whereas some screen memories can also contain "a connection with experiences in early youth which have remained suppressed." (320) This latter mould is useful when reading the memories Woolf relates of the looking glass in the hallway of her family Hyde Park home and of sensory bliss in nature.

Woolf begins 'Sketch of the Past' with her "first memory. This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground - [her] mother's dress; and she [Julia] was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue . . ." (78) This is most likely a screen memory. This is a memory selected to become a screen because of circumstances which occurred after the memory, making it particularly perfect to represent an emotional reality. This memory represents physical closeness to Julia, also possession of her sole attention, described further on in 'Sketch' as an impossibly rare occurrence. In *The Oxford Handbook* Laura Marcus

describes this memory as being “of closeness to the mother, who fills the child’s vision and who is, like the pattern on her dress, both foreground and background. ‘There she was,’ Woolf writes later in the memoir, ‘in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first’”. (223) This assertion of Woolf’s provides the motivation for the creation of a screen memory. Julia was the essence of childhood, and her death before Woolf’s adolescence confines Julia further into that Cathedral space. The likelihood of Woolf having sat in Julia’s lap in any public transport is the basis of the selection of this as the container for the screen memory. Julia’s death and her all-encompassing presence in childhood provide the purpose of the screen memory.

Woolf moves on to her other first memory which is imbued with extraordinary significance:

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills - then my bowl without a doubt stand upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the wakes breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach . . . It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. (78–9)

To Marcus “the second (‘first’) memory seems to mark the emergence of self-consciousness, of a sense of separate identity that is also a sense of oneness with the surrounding world.” (223) This oneness is also the core of Woolf’s third memory; of stopping on her way to the beach, again at St Ives, to look at the gardens, hear the bees, see the apples, leaves, and flowers. (80) “The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. But again, I cannot describe that rapture. It was rapture

rather than ecstasy.” (80) Woolf’s use of a semi-colon places the emphasis of her sensual experience on looking whereas the overriding sensory input of the previous memory is mostly aural. Woolf has deep clarity around her feelings in each memory; the former is of ecstasy and the second is palpably of rapture, though the cause and experience of both are indescribable. These ‘second’ and third memories express the same sensory openness and reception which is not overwhelmed but soothed and magnanimous. The indescribable but clear emotional purpose of both these memories is indicative of them being screens for Woolf’s two distinctive and valuable experiences of nature.

In ‘On Being Ill’ Woolf’s connection to nature is repeated. Woolf observes that "it is only the recumbent who know what, after all, Nature is at no pains to conceal - that she in the end will conquer; heat will leave the world; stiff with frost we shall cease to drag ourselves about the fields; ice will lie thick upon factory and engine; the sun will go out.” (200) Importance is placed on nature in Woolf’s early memories in ‘Sketch’ and is presented as wisdom acquired in adulthood only through reflection. Therefore, these two incredibly lucid but practically unremarkable and everyday memories could be retrogressive screen memories, an adult value given tangible form by creating useful idyllic memories. Useful in the sense that they embody that adult desire purely. Woolf admits “the peculiarity of these two strong memories is that each was very simple. I am hardly aware of myself, but only the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength.” (81) This relation of memory followed by a closer inspection of what the memory offers to the adult Woolf is typical of ‘Sketch,’ however Woolf’s observation of childhood memories creating the sense of being a container for a feeling is telling. If the memory is only the sensation, then it is quite literally a screen, for an emotion which has been recognised as important after its occurrence. (Freud 305)

Self-dissection is also visible in this passage from a letter Woolf wrote to Smyth quoted by Marcus (2017): “what with you and Vanessa, I feel rather like a mouse pinned out on a board for dissection . . . By the way, why do you take so much interest in your own character? Or don't you? Why are you so fiercely and savagely aware of what is to me a transient and fitful flame?” (265) Marcus claims that this passage “deploys the terms of embarrassment, including shame, blushing and self-exposure; concepts and affects to which this essay will return.” (266) This desire for a lack of embarrassment and the capacity for more blatant self-awareness is repeated in a July 1940 letter to Smyth about the latter’s autobiography quoted by Marcus. “I wonder how it feels to do it. I mean to be so candid; and convinced that the public will be enthralled. I couldn’t do it; but then you can. How? . . . you can confess so openly, what I should have hidden so carefully . . .” (266) Marcus quotes a December 1940 letter: “I was thinking the other night that there’s never been a woman's autobiography. Nothing to compare with Rousseau. Chastity and modesty have I suppose have [sic] been the reason . . . I should like an analysis of your sex life. As Rousseau did his. More introspection. More intimacy.” (266) In these letters Woolf admits to: feeling embarrassment at displaying self-interest and attention, a desire for greater self-knowledge, and an interest in more candour and less modesty in life-writing. The former fear of being perceived as self-interested contradicts and is hindered by the latter idolisation of introspection and self-interest.

This shame around self-interest is displayed in ‘Sketch’ as stretching back through, and originating in, Woolf’s childhood:

When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it . . . At any rate, the looking-glass shame has lasted all my life . . . I cannot now powder my nose in

public. Everything to do with dress - to be fitted, to come into a room wearing a new dress - still frightens me; at least makes me shy, self-conscious, uncomfortable. (81)

Woolf connects these memories of shame to another memory in the same hallway. “Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me on to this [slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon], and as I sat there he began to explore my body.” (82) In *Virginia Woolf and Heritage* Marcus quotes a letter to Smyth in which Woolf refers to this incident with Gerald Duckworth. “I still shiver with shame at the memory of my half brother, standing me on a ledge, aged about 6, and so exploring my private parts. Why should I have felt shame then?” (267) Similarly, in ‘Sketch’ Woolf is interested in her capacity at the time to feel shame. “This seems to show that a feeling about certain parts of the body . . . must be instinctive.” (82) This is indicative of Woolf’s unhindered approach in ‘Sketch’ which Marcus discusses and displays. Marcus approaches her discussion of shame in ‘Sketch’ as a constructive emotion. Woolf does not reject shame but investigates it. How was she capable of feeling it as a young girl, Woolf asks. A concern with where the emotion came from is presented in ‘Sketch’ and in her letters to Smyth. Woolf’s recollection of her childhood abuse “becomes Woolf’s own means to an exploration, and interrogation, of the intricate relationships between identity, memory, the exposure of the self’s intimacies, and the practices of writing.” (277)

Woolf moves on to relate another memory of the same looking glass in the same hallway. “I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face - the face of an animal - suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me.” (83) This last sentence displays the creation of a screen memory. The face in the glass continues to trigger a memorable fear response, therefore the

dream/memory serves a representative purpose. For the aforementioned varied reasons this specific mirror is associated with fear and shame. A remembered visual provides the perfect screen for this lifelong powerful emotion.

In *Virginia Woolf and Heritage* Marcus defines shame in relation to guilt:

Guilt . . . leaves out a lot even of one's ethical consciousness. It can direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparation in the name, simply, of what has happened to them. But it cannot by itself help one to understand one's relations to those happenings, or to rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live. Only shame can do that, because it embodies conceptions of what one is and of how one is related to others.

(271)

To Sartre as quoted by Marcus, it is shame, not guilt, that has a transformative power over memory. Shame is so pertinent to 'Sketch' because the essay is about understanding the past. Considering shame is crucial when considering 'Sketch' because shame inherently promotes introspection and development and to feel shame one must also have a conception of self.

Sartre's description of shame is applicable to 'Sketch' for other reasons as well. "Pure shame,' Sartre writes, 'is not a feeling of being this or that guilt object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other'." (271) This recognition of physical existence and therefore vulnerability and dependence are the dimension which connects each of Woolf's looking glass memories, as well as their location. Woolf writes of her and her sister's embarrassment at being caught looking in the mirror, that "I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body." (82) The feeling of being physically out of control is also present in the incident with Duckworth. "I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his

hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop.” (Schulkind 82) Marcus continues, “for Sartre, the lesson which the Other teaches me is shame: and the lesson of shame is that I have an outside that is vulnerable and exposed, a body that exceeds my own conscious experience.” (272) Marcus’ understanding of shame has a feminist dimension. “The process of becoming a woman, as Beauvoir describes it in *The Second Sex*, is, in Guenther’s phrase, ‘an extended lesson in shame’ (33). ‘The little girl,’ Beauvoir writes, ‘feels that her body is escaping her, that it is no longer the clear expression of her individuality . . .’” (272) In response shame is attached instinctively to the body, no matter the context. Marcus conceives of shame as a conflicting emotion which both desires and rejects attention so shows and hides the self. (272) This understanding of shame mirrors Woolf’s experience of life-writing, her aforementioned simultaneous embarrassment around self-interest and respect for introspection.

Marcus continues her contemplation of Woolf’s life-writing in *The Oxford Handbook*. Woolf wrote in her diary of the Memoir Club’s first meeting that “I doubt that anyone will say the interesting things but they can’t prevent their coming out”. (213) This quote displays Woolf’s understanding of value in life-writing as something which is expressed unconsciously. Indeed, ‘22 Hyde Park Gate,’ one of Woolf’s contributions to the Memoir Club, is intertwined with intended and unintended meaning. ‘Hyde Park’ is a memoir of the aforementioned George Duckworth, largely presenting him as heartbroken by their mother’s death, a dowdy, reverent, and obtuse but honourable man whom Woolf was desperate to impress. George was idolised by the older women who bore witness to how seriously he took his responsibility to his dead mother’s youngest children. However, ‘Hyde Park’ performs an impressive trick of misdirection. Woolf describes his way of ending arguments about class with “‘kiss me, kiss me, you beloved,’ he would vociferate; and the argument was drowned in kisses. Everything was drowned with kisses.” (36) Woolf also relates the strange pressure on

Vanessa and Virginia to provide him with the behaviour he expected from his half-sisters. “We were driving Gerald from the house, he cried - when a young man was not happy at home - he himself had always been content - but if his sisters - if Vanessa refused to go out with him - if he could not bring his friends to the house - in short; it was clear that the chaste, the immaculate George Duckworth would be forced into the arms of whores.” (38)

The short unfinished sentences relate the sense of George’s passionate and flustered emotional state. After a social occasion during which Woolf embarrassed George, she goes to bed and ‘Hyde Park’ finally reveals its secret in the final two paragraphs:

Sleep had almost come to me. The room was dark. The house silent. Then, creaking stealthily, the door opened; treading gingerly, someone entered. “Who?” I cried. “Don’t be frightened”, George whispered. “And don’t turn on the light, oh beloved. Beloved-” and he flung himself on my bed, and took me in his arms.

Yes, the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also. (42)

The length of ‘Hyde Park,’ 12 pages, and its format, not novel, not diary entry, but essay, are essential to its trick. The reader’s attention can only be held away from the sexual dimension of George’s ‘brotherly’ attention, for as long as we are. Yet this is the shortest possible form through which the reader could be naturally familiarised with the dynamic of strained and resentful forced familial attachment and the motif of “the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia” (42): “if Mrs Willett of Brighton could have seen him then she would have certainly compared him to Christ on the cross.” (38) ‘Hyde Park’ is a marvellous exhibit of a practically finalised piece of Woolf’s life-writing which is completely self-contained and yet grapples with the same themes as ‘Sketch’ and ‘Reminiscences’.

In his collection of essays, letters, and diary entries entitled *The Platform of Time*, Rosenbaum discusses the complexity of Woolf's presentation of her father in her many life-writing essays. "The ambivalence with which Woolf came to regard her father in 'Sketch of the Past' is now only implicit" (48) in 'A Daughter's Memories,' a short biography by Woolf of her father included in *Platform*. Rosenbaum's use of the word ambivalence in reference to Woolf's relationship with her father is significant.

Molloy describes Freud's concept of ambivalence as referring to a child's relationship with the parent, as experienced by young men and women towards either parent, though Freud considers the ambivalent emotional process to be experienced more intensely by young women towards their mothers. (388) Young women experience excessive hostility towards their mothers which forces them away from their intense attachment to their mothers. (388) "Freud relies on the term "ambivalent" to explain the intensity of her affection and its conversion into hostility . . . ." (388) In addition to Rosenbaum's reference to Woolf's ambivalent attitude to her father, Marcus (2017) claimed that "other determinants include her extensive reading of Freud at this time, in particular in relation to her exploration of her "ambivalence"—a word and concept she took from Freud in her reading of him in the late 1930s—towards her father." (264) Therefore, ambivalence can be justifiably used to explain the great dissimilarity between Woolf's portrayal of her father in 'Sketch' and other life-writing.

Marcus (2021) quotes from Woolf's diary. "My mother, I was thinking, had 2 characters. I was thinking of my memoirs. The platform of time. How I see father from the 2 angles. As a child condemning; as a woman of 58 understanding - I should say tolerating. Both views true?" (222). This diary extract displays Woolf's awareness of the difference between her experience of her father as a child and as a young adult. Rosenbaum (2008) quotes the following diary extract:

How beautiful they were, those old people - I mean father & mother - how simple, how clear, how untroubled . . . He loved her - oh & was so candid & reasonable & transparent. How serene & gay even their life reads to me; no mud; no whirlpools . . . But if I read as a contemporary I shall lose my child's vision & must stop. Nothing turbulent; nothing involved; no introspection. (49–50)

'Sketch' seems to be this feared turbulent introspection which stole from Woolf her youthful vision of her parents' "serene & gay" domestic bliss. 'Sketch' is a contemporary reading whereas 'Memories' is portraying a child's unexamined recollections.

In 'Memories,' Woolf remembers Leslie: "as he mounted the stairs to his study with his firm, regular tread he would burst, not into song, for he was entirely unmusical, but into a strange rhythmical chant, for verse of all kinds, both 'utter trash,' as he called it, and the most sublime words of Milton and Wordsworth, stuck in his memory . . ." (60) Woolf continues, "he would convey exactly what he thought of [one] in two or three words . . . no one was more respectful of any feeling that seemed to him genuine." (61) It is difficult to marry this description of this respectful, articulate, and eccentric father with the father in 'Sketch'. Woolf describes Leslie's rages at Vanessa every Wednesday: "he flung at her all the phrases about shooting Niagara, about his misery, her extravagance, that came handy . . . With a deep groan he picked up his pen and with ostentatiously trembling hands he wrote out the check . . . I was speechless." (147) Vanessa's "refusal to accept her role, part slave, part angel, exacerbated him; checked the flow that had become necessary of self pity, and stirred in him instinct of which he was unconscious." (148) "I did not think him foolish", Woolf writes, "I thought him brutal." (148)

"If at one moment he rebuked a daughter sharply for smoking a cigarette . . . she had only to ask him if she might become a painter, and he assured her that so long as she took her work seriously he would give her all the help he could. He had not special love for painting; but he

kept his word. Freedom of that sort was worth thousands of cigarettes.” (Rosenbaum 2008, 63) Freedom of what sort? In ‘Sketch,’ Woolf writes: “Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate. The Victorian age and the Edwardian age . . . Thus it was that we perceived so keenly, while he raged, that he was somehow ridiculous.” (149)

Freedom existed only when Woolf’s father would go to his study and her siblings to their various occupations. “From ten to one Victorian society did not exert any special pressure upon us . . . I read and wrote. For three hours we lived in the world which we still inhabit. For at this moment (November 1940) she [Vanessa] is painting at Charleston; and I am writing here in the garden room at Monks House.” (150–1) Yet Woolf - ambivalently - continues her flattery in *Memories*. “Lowell, when he called him ‘L.S., the most lovable of men,’ has best described the quality that makes him, after all these years, unforgettable.” (65) This unforgettably lovable man is not present in ‘Sketch’. Woolf, astoundingly, claims “the praise he would have valued most . . . was Meredith’s tribute after his death: ‘He was the one man to my knowledge worthy to have married your mother.’” (65) This last compliment allows the tyrant father some room. Being worthy of Julia was the praise Leslie would have valued most, had it been true. If not for ‘Sketch’ being unfinished and unpublished by Woolf, this ambivalence would verge on cognitive dissonance. The expectation set up by Freud’s concept of ambivalence, is clearly seen in this juxtaposition. Woolf displays an intense childhood attachment to her father - “he loved her - oh & was so candid & reasonable & transparent” (Rosenbaum 49) - which is severed by intense aversion in adolescence.

‘Sketch’ describes Woolf’s occasional capacity to reach an optimistic or at least composed state:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all

human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (85)

This sentiment is echoed in her essay 'On Being Ill'. "We need the poets to imagine for us. The duty of Heaven-making should be attached to the office of Poet Laureate." (201) Woolf connects the need for existential purpose with professional writing, or at least the product of professional writers. The value of Shakespeare is not as an artist, neither is the Poet Laureate's; their value is the provision of religious meaning. Of reading when healthy Woolf writes, "one may hazard one's conjectures privately, make one's notes in the margin; but, knowing that someone has said it before, or said it better, the zest is gone. Illness, in its kingly sublimity, sweeps all that aside and leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself." (202) Confrontation with the prospect of death puts art into perspective and Woolf's aforementioned philosophy urgently to the forefront. Therefore, in the face of mortality and chaos, *Hamlet*, not Shakespeare, is salvation. Having displayed the connections between 'Sketch' and 'On Being Ill,' and between 'Sketch' and Woolf's letters and diary extracts, and having put forward my interpretation of Woolf's ambivalent portrayal of her father, thereby proving that the topics in *Moments* are not contained to unfinished writings.

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