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Gillian Beer has observed that 'refusing to resolve is not irresolution, but assertion'. Discuss Woolf's strategies of irresolution in this light. What exactly is not resolved? In what way could this be said to be assertion? Assertion of what?

As an author who wrote her first novel just after the turn of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf would have found herself influenced by two opposing times: the Victorian era of her childhood and the new experimental age. Woolf claims that 'on or about December 1910, human character changed', both artistically and socially. [1] She was referring to the opening of an exhibition of Post-Impressionist art, which exposed the British public to a new idea of what art could be, and arguably opened the floodgates for other forms of modernism, including the literary movement. As well as its artistic connotations, 1910 marked the end of Edward VII's reign: a cut-off point in history which signified movement from the old to the new world. Society was changing rapidly, especially in the wake of the First World War, which left many people, especially women, in new and uncertain positions in society. Women found themselves caught between two possibilities: a life with the social and economic freedom gained in wartime or the traditional life of a homemaker, and it seemed that these two options were mutually exclusive. Woolf herself was not unaffected by these literary and social changes. As a female, her interest was in interrogating the unresolved nature of a woman's role, both in her personal life and in her works. It is true that her male characters are also affected by irresolution, especially in terms of language and communication, but her female characters are even more so, due to their uncertain social roles and new possible paths in life. It is for this reason that Woolf employs several "strategies of irresolution" relating to the woman's place in

[1] Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' p635 in Virginia Woolf module reader (2014) p635, line 4

society in order to assert social critiques. These "strategies" reflect changes in the feminine experience: firstly, avoidance of the conventional marriage plot, secondly, the creation of a new language usable by women, and thirdly the irresolution of Woolf's own identity as an author.

Historically marriage has played an important role in the construction of a woman's life, as it marks the evolution from child to adult and gives the woman her purpose: that of birthing and rearing children. In *The Voyage Out* (*Voyage*), Susan is a prime example of a woman defined by marriage: it is 'the only thing, the solution required by every one she knew'.[2] Once she becomes engaged, she finds herself treated with 'instinctive respect'[p165] now that she is valued and defined by her relationship with a man. Similarly, *A Room of One's Own* (*Room*) claims that women in fiction are always 'shown in their relation to men' so there are very few portrayals of women as people in their own right.[3] This is supported by Rachel's loss of her corporeal self in her own mind. When she is ill and the reader is presented only with her internal thoughts, she is not defined by being neither her father's child nor Terence's object of desire. Therefore she becomes ephemeral and undefined, associated with the rolling sea and changes in light and shadow which blur the boundaries of her person.

The only other options apart from marriage presented by Woolf in *Voyage* are spinsterhood (Miss Allen) or death (Rachel). Both avoid awakening female sexuality and thereby keep the woman in a childlike state. Miss Allen takes pride in her unopened bottle of crème de menthe, called Oliver, which is a childish substitute for a life partner, but also suggests her own untouched body, while Rachel regresses to a foetus-like state. It is no coincidence that Rachel falls ill upon becoming engaged to Terence, and the only way to escape marriage is

[2] Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (London: Penguin, 1992) p164 All following references within the essay.
[3] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2004) p96 All following references within the essay.

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through dying before the loss of her chastity and therefore her childhood. In her essay, Suzette Henke cites a 'retreat to the embryonic sanctuary of the oceanic unconscious' and indeed during her illness, Woolf employs multiple images of the sea to describe Rachel's thoughts: 'she fell into a deep sticky pool' and 'curled up at the bottom of the sea'[p322].[4] Henke also dubs Rachel "la mystérique", claiming that her illness shows signs of hysteria: a representation of her non-conformity with traditional gender roles. Hysteria is said to stem from 'an original seduction, rape or unsolicited sexual advance', meaning that Rachel's illness originated in Richard Dalloway's kiss, and her resulting dreams prove her rejection of sexuality, both male and female.[5] Her first dream in Chapter 5 presents a negative female sexuality through the Freudian vaginal tunnel that 'oozed with damp'[p68], though the main focus is the masculine threat. There is a 'little deformed man'[p68] who gibbers like an animal, and even once Rachel awakens, she cannot rid herself of the sexual threat of bestial male figures pursuing her: they 'stopped to snuffle at her door'[p68]. Later during her illness, this dream is echoed almost verbatim with 'little deformed women', while the walls 'oozed with damp'[p313], suggesting that the sexual threat has not been erased by Rachel's engagement. Instead, Rachel's fear has turned towards herself, with the switch between men to women, and female sexuality is now the focus but is no less horrifying. In accordance with Henke, Rachel's death is certainly proof of a refusal to adhere to patriarchal decrees, but it is also the beginning of Woolf's assertion through irresolution. Her dying is not an achievement in escaping society, nor is it a lament of the patriarchy's effect on women: it merely describes the lack of options open to a female who feels there

[4] Suzette Henke, 'De/Colonizing the Subject in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*: Rachel Vinrace as *La Mystérique'* from *Virginia Woolf: Emerging Perspectives* (New York: Pace University Press, 1994) pp103-8 p106
[5] Ibid p103

is more to life than marriage. In this way, Rachel and Terence's heterosexual love plot, instead of ending the novel happily, leads rather to a refusal of convention and an impasse of events: her death leaves the marriage plot unresolved.

Woolf also interrogates how female identity is constructed. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, convention states that a woman is defined by her marital state, as Susan is, but there is an alternative explored in Chapter 10 of *Voyage*: self discovery through education. Woolf revealingly describes Rachel's literary education as her beginning to 'defy the world'[p112] while she is safe in her relatives' home, which is both a 'fortress as well as a sanctuary'[p112] against the threat of patriarchal power. Books allow Rachel to think for herself and reach her own conclusions, while informing her specifically about 'women and life'[p113]. They also provide her with a link to what is 'modern'[p113], perhaps reflecting Woolf's own education, which was made possible by her family, but then propelled her into forming her own opinions and identity. However, when Rachel is on the cusp of self-discovery, having reached a 'consciousness of her own existence'[p114], her possible sense of self is destroyed by the marriage plot as Helen arrives with a letter inviting her to the picnic where she will meet Terence. The ease of convention overpowers the possibility of something new and Rachel is set on the path of the love plot. *Voyage* has been described as a failed *bildungsroman* as it follows Rachel's journey into self-knowledge which is never completed. Christa Froula suggests that this journey is a reflection of a traditional male initiation ceremony into sexual maturity: the boy must undergo a symbolic death in order to reach adulthood.[6] In contrast, Rachel's death does not symbolise rebirth and evolution, but rather an impasse as she fails to find her own identity. It could be argued that Woolf's purpose in this is to criticise the woman's role in society as too narrow; the feminine experience must include

[6] Christine Froula, 'Out of the Chrysalis: Female Initiation and Female Authority in Virginia Woolf's The Voyage Out' (Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 63-90) p64

marriage and if it does not then selfhood cannot be achieved. The academic education open to girls is too weak an experience to allow them to form their identities independently of marriage.

In addition to critiquing female academic education, Woolf addresses the lack of sexual education for women through her presentation of Rachel's naivety. Despite a brief feeling of exultation after Dalloway's kiss, Rachel's main emotion turns to discomfort as she realises her ignorance. Being the erotic object of a man is frightening because of the sexual threat it poses, leading Rachel to childishly call sexuality 'terrifying…disgusting'[p72]. Since there has been no way of educating women sexually apart from through the experience of marriage, the unknown quality of sexuality can have no other effect than fear and it is in this way that Woolf makes her social critique clear.

Moving past irresolution on the level of plot, Woolf's language and how she writes are similarly unresolved. This problem again seems to stem from womanhood and the place of a female writer in the patriarchal world of academia. In *Voyage*, Woolf's first novel, we are presented with a female protagonist whose creativity finds an outlet not through words but through music. Terence and Rachel are contrasted, as he wishes to write a novel on silence while ironically she cannot find any language to use and therefore must be silent. Rachel frequently fails to express herself through words ('I want...she could not finish the sentence'[p52]), and finds herself excluded from Hirst's intelligent male sphere: 'as if a gate had clanged in her face'[p142]. As language is a product of the patriarchy and therefore unusable by women, Rachel must turn to music to express herself, but this is not seen as equal to the power of words. Rachel believes that '[music] just seems to say all the things one can't say oneself'[p153] but Terence patronisingly likens her playing to a dog doing tricks

[p276]. The problem of a lack of language available to women is also addressed in *Room*. Since language is masculine and therefore the author is male, women cannot be presented in fiction apart from in relation to men. Woolf highlights this through her example of Chloe and Olivia. Their relationship cannot be accurately described because a man is ignorant of how two women behave together when they are alone, so it would be impossible to write truthful fiction about women. 'How literature would suffer!'[p97] without the portrayal of men in their own right, and indeed, how literature has suffered up until this point without a similar portrayal of women. Therefore to Woolf the solution appears to be the creation of a new female language that can stand on equal terms with that of the male language.

In *Room* Woolf claims there are masculine sentences that are 'unsuited for a woman's use'[p89], and praises Austen for her creation of a 'perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use'[p89]. However, this separation of the masculine and feminine sentences proves that if a woman's language does exist, then it is outside the male sphere, much as Rachel's music was. Woolf commends Austen's writing in *Room*, and in *Voyage* she is similarly used as an example of a woman writing quite unlike a man, and yet this trait undermines her value to a male audience: 'she always sends you to sleep!'[p53] says Mrs Dalloway to her husband. Critics have argued that Woolf presents herself in a similar way, by addressing a female audience and using a language which 'excludes the male reader'[7]. However, considering many of Woolf's contemporaries in the Bloomsbury group were men, it seems unlikely that she wrote to deliberately exclude them, especially considering her fear of being excluded from their masculine writers' sphere. It is undeniable that *Room* is written calmly and charmingly, as it advocates a composed stance for women writers rather than

[7] Lillian M. Bisson, 'Doodling Her Way to Insight: From Incompetent Student to Empowered Rhetor in *A Room of One's Own'* from *Virginia Woolf: Emerging Perspectives* pp197-203 p198

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letting their anger show. However, it seems rather that this language is a calculated construction in order to show the male audience, outsiders intruding on a female conversation, that not all feminist writing is undermining the patriarchy. This is supported by Bisson's essay: '[Woolf] lulls her male readers by playing the role to which they have assigned her and…making a strength of what they perceive as weakness'.[8] Here, this "weakness" must be the outsider status of the woman in academia; while Woolf resented her lack of formal education, she acknowledged that it gave her more freedom. In *Room*, a male student seems to be far better at research than the female narrator, but in fact his rigid Oxbridge education merely sets him on the same path as countless others, while the narrator is free to discover that which is without precedent [p32]. This preference for research into the unknown could be interpreted as an assertion by Woolf that the unfinished, or unresolved, nature of female education and language leads to innovation and social evolution.

However, the final chapter of *Room* suggests the optimum outcome of writing: androgyny. The two discrete languages of male and female outlined in the text are meant to combine, as illustrated in the image of a man and woman getting into a taxi and travelling together. 'A great mind is androgynous'[p113] and yet in Woolf's contemporary society, which is particularly conscious of the differences between the sexes, such a combination is impossible. Even Woolf herself writes in a style that is gendered: *Voyage* treats the subject of female sexuality from an insider's point of view and *Room* uses a narrator who is the voice of the "everywoman", but not the "everyman". It is for this reason that it appears that Woolf has no true assertion to make. She only talks of ideals and shows her preoccupation with the future and its possibilities: she has aspirations

[8] Ibid p202

that society's gender values will have changed completely in a hundred years' time [p131], so perhaps the evolution of androgynous minds is not too ambitious an idea.

Having acknowledged the irresolution present in both the plot and the language of Woolf's text, the next stage is to examine the figure of the author herself. Despite writing *Room* in the first person, as if in dialogue with the reader, it cannot be assumed that the narratorial voice is Woolf herself. The fact that she invites the reader to call her Mary Beton, Seton or Carmichael makes this clear: she is not Virginia Woolf, nor is she any specific person at all. The purpose of the unresolved self may be to create a universal narrator, so that Woolf may present her authorial figure as the "everywoman", whose voice connects with the reader regardless of class or age.[9] *Voyage* presents a less experimental narrative form, mostly adhering to an omniscient third person narrator, but it could be argued that Woolf's authorial self finds its reflection in Rachel's quest for identity. The novel is a *bildingsroman* not only for Rachel, but also for Woolf as an author. There are similarities between the two women, not only in their gender, age and class, but also their similar searches for a legitimate path in life. Rachel's passion is music while Woolf is a budding author, and they both struggle with the question of marriage. *Voyage* was in the process of being written when Woolf received a proposal of marriage from her future husband and this led to bouts of anxiety and troubling dreams, similar to Rachel's menacing nightmares. In a letter addressed to Leonard after his proposal, Woolf wrote: 'By God, I will not look upon marriage as a profession', making clear her disdain for having no other ambition in life. [10] Perhaps, then, *Voyage* is an exploration of her own possible life decisions; having lived an unresolved life through Rachel, Woolf is free to carve

[9] See Christine Farris, 'What's Gender Got To Do With It?: Introducing Non-English Majors to Gendered Textuality' from *Virginia Woolf: Emerging Perspectives* pp52-8
[10] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage Books, 1997) p310

her own more successful path in the world. In her essay, Froula calls *Voyage* Woolf's 'first attempt to imagine an alternative to the female initiation plot', meaning that she then succeeded in finding a stronger sense of self through Rachel's failure.[11] In which case her assertion, from Rachel's unresolved fate, is the creation of her own authorial voice. Indeed, her second novel *Night and Day* presents a far more assertive female character in Katherine, who chooses a different sort of marriage and does not die. It seems that Woolf managed to find a balance between marriage and her work, in contrast to Rachel's creativity being stifled by Terence. Hermione Lee claims that the Woolves saw their 'marriage as an opposing force to death', suggesting a far more positive view of the factor which sends Rachel to her demise.[12] This is presumably due to Woolf's evolving opinion once she was married herself and found that Leonard supported her through her anxieties, especially those relating to her writing. Thus the opposing forces of marriage and academia were no longer so black and white: each had their positives and negatives.

The irresolution of the identity of the author is also an assertion of modernist writing. The erasure or obscurity of the author was advocated by a number of modernist writers, including T.S. Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Eliot claims that an author must go through a 'continual self-sacrifice' and 'depersonalization' so that their work is not limited by its origins and can be instead appreciated in relation to the canon of literature.[13] Woolf equally despises the 'damned egotistical self'[14] and aims to avoid elements of autobiography in her work. However, her depersonalization seems to stem rather

[11] Froula p63
[12] Lee p319
[13] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in Invention and Tradition module reader II (2012) p40 lines 22-24
[14] '*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, *Vol 2: 1920-24*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Penguin, 1981) p14

from a desire to free the reader. In *Room* she states that literature is fallible because of the narrator: 'lies will flow from my lips but there might be some truth mixed up with them'[p5] so it is the reader's job to decide which is which. This theory is closer to the ideas explored in Roland Barthes' essay 'Death of the Author', wherein he asserts the importance of the reader over the writer. Since the reader is without context, their interpretation is limitless. However, the presence of the author makes it easy for the reader to assign the text an absolute truth from what the original intention was: but 'the unity of a text…is in its destination'.[15] The beginning of *Room* is in agreement with this statement; the narrator is a deliberately vague figure who presents no absolute truths in order to 'give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions'[p4]. Therefore Woolf's assertion here is the importance of individual thought as she critiques blindly following the opinions of the authorial voice. She asserts the importance of the reader in the act of reading by removing the figure of the author from their pedestal, rendering them equal.

In conclusion, the irresolution of plot in Woolf's first novel represents a period of irresolution in her own self. She sought a way of resolving the conflicting factors which affected her as a woman: the tradition and obligation of marriage and her creative work. As well representing her own personal problems, *Voyage* allowed Woolf to present her first social criticism of the situation of women in the twentieth century. *Voyage* shows the lack of sexual education for women, which can lead to fear and inhibition, while *Room* treats the inadequacy of female formal education which leaves women on an unequal field with men. Despite Woolf's intentions, how effective are these social criticisms when presented in her writing and could they lead to any social change? Firstly, as previously

[15] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1967) [23/12/14] <http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf>

mentioned, by lamenting the place of women in a piece of woman's writing, (that is, a work that is both about women and addressed to a female audience), there can be no expected effect on the male sphere. The use of a charming narrative voice is not a forceful call for change either. Secondly, as a modernist, Woolf's innovative narrative technique is often the main objective, not feminism. Though she was undoubtedly a feminist, Woolf did not wish to be known as such, because of the effect of the word itself: 'I shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a sapphist' she wrote in her diary about the publication of *Room*. [16] The association of feminism and lesbianism suggests the strong negativity of both terms, because they supposedly represent a woman who is anti-men and threatening the power of the patriarchy. Woolf's preoccupation with how she was perceived by others, especially by her male modernist peers, means that her experimental writing, which is more likely to be taken seriously, took priority over her feminist ideas. Even in the modern day, the word "feminist" conjures up a plethora of negative associations, so it is unsurprising that Woolf's social critiques on the feminine experience had no great effect on society at large.

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