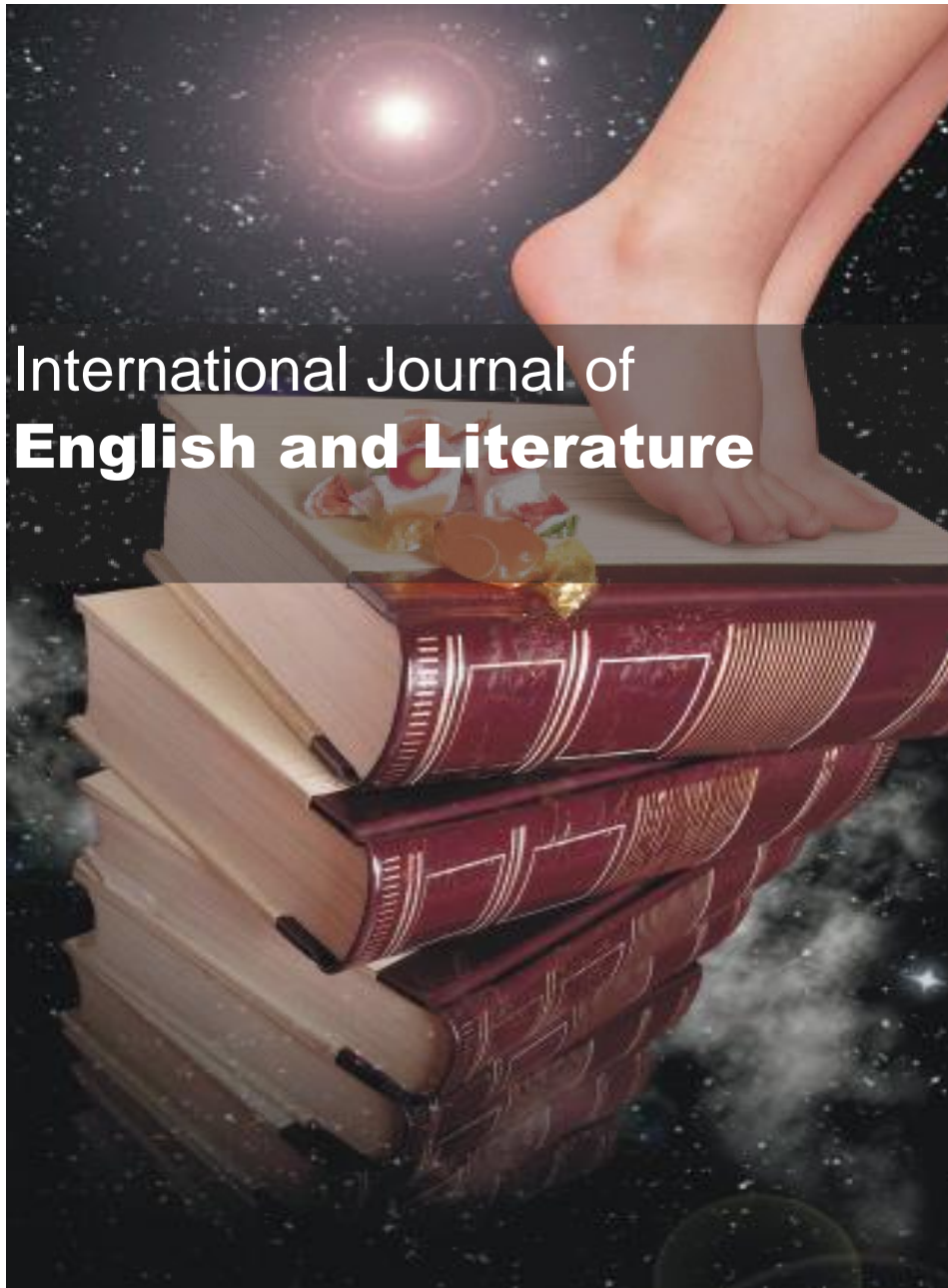


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Review

“What a Lark! What a Plunge!” The influence of Sigmund Freud on Virginia Woolf

Heather Roetto

Department of Fiction, Antioch University, Los Angeles, United States.

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To what extent did Sigmund Freud influence Virginia Woolf? Although they shared an advocacy for truth by means of stream of consciousness narration and free association, Woolf claimed to have had only superficial knowledge of Freud. Even if this was true, she could not help but be aware of his theories of psychoanalysis through the media of her day or by way of her publisher Hogarth Press, which published Freud. As Woolf looked closely at her own mental illness through Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs Dalloway, it would seem that Freud’s theories of hysteria, depression, and psychosexual development took shape within her pages. However, it was not until Woolf admitted to reading Freud after his death that she used his knowledge to delve into the traumas of her past, which argues that perhaps Freud had more of an impact on Woolf after all.

Key words: Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, mental illness, and Mrs Dalloway.

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf

She was one of the most celebrated authors of the twentieth century. She was a writer (of the literary kind), a feminist, a publisher, and she suffered from numerous bouts of mental illness.

Sigmund Freud.

He was one of the most celebrated psychologists of the twentieth century. He was a writer (of the academic kind), a one-time cocaine addict, a neurologist, and he was the founding father of psychoanalysis. Even in these short

descriptions, a writer’s mind can draw multiple connections between the two: the victim and the savior, the feminist and the chauvinist, the shut-in and the partier, but the connection between Woolf and Freud was more than what can be generated through their backgrounds. They knew each other in the most intimate way artists can know one another through their work and through each other. As such, this affiliation left its mark on Woolf whether she was aware of it on a conscious or a subconscious level.

While Woolf initially dismissed Freud and then grew to understand his work, Freud’s impact can be found in her writing of Mrs Dalloway, which was a break away from

E-mail: heather.roetto@gmail.com.

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the traditional fiction structure of its time. Within the novel, Freud's theories and techniques start to take shape, showing similarities between the two in not only the methodology Woolf used to write *Mrs Dalloway*, but in the analysis of its main characters as well.

In addition to these similarities, Freud's impact was not restricted to the fictional world of Woolf's creation, but of her real world as well. Woolf was an advocate for writing true to life and much of her life went into her writing. For this reason, Freud may offer insight into Woolf's most intimate struggles, how she managed her mental illness, and what might have been the underlying reason why she walked into a river with a large rock in her pocket on March 28, 1941.

The favorite

Sigmund Freud was destined for infamy, even at birth. After researching town records, historians discovered Freud's true date of birth of March 6, 1856, which was two months earlier than previously thought. Mostly likely, Freud's mother was already pregnant with Freud before she married; a fact his parent's went to great lengths to keep it secret (Hergenbahn, 2001: 458). Freud was not only a "love child," but also his mother's darling, her little "Sigi,"¹ and she predicted that one day he would be a great man (Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979: 5). All that love and adoration from his mother went right to Freud's ego (an aspect of the mind, he would later analyze) and turned him into somewhat of a "momma's boy." Anything "Sigi" wanted, "Sigi" received; including insisting that his sister, Anna, cancel her piano lessons because Freud did not like the noise while he studied (Reef, 2001: 17). Freud later argued that there was immense psychological benefit in being a mother's favorite by stating, "A man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success" (Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979: 5).

Freud was certainly a success despite multiple false starts, which included an advocacy for the use of cocaine. After experimenting with the drug, Freud realized that it cured his feelings of depression with seemingly no side effects. He was so convinced of the drug's benefits that he sent packets to his sisters and Martha Bernays, his fiancé, who he thought could use a little color to her cheeks (Hergenbahn, 2001: 460). He also encouraged his friend, Ernest von Fleischl-Marxow, to take cocaine because, at that time, Fleischl-Marxow had become unintentionally addicted to morphine in his attempt to alleviate pain associated with tumors in his hand (Reef, 2001: 41). Believing cocaine to be harmless, he successfully turned Fleischl-Marxow away from morphine and, subsequently, Freud wrote three articles praising the use of the drug. When Fleischl-Marxow

started suffering from a drug-induced psychosis after consuming increasing quantities of cocaine, Freud started to doubt his earlier belief that the drug was without side effect. Shortly thereafter, Freud stopped his use of cocaine and withdrew his endorsement of the drug. Although Freud was successful in curing his friend of his morphine abuse, Fleischl-Marxow later died a cocaine addict (Hergenbahn, 2001: 460). Following Freud's cocaine debacle, he became interested in human behavior after studying hysteria with Jean Martin Charcot, a neurologist at the Salpêtrière asylum. It was at this point that Freud began to question the popular beliefs of hysteria as a physical illness and instead hypothesized that it was rooted in the psyche. As if spurred on by his mother's prophecy, Freud followed his theory and his path eventually led him toward the field of psychology where he would later become the founding father of psychoanalysis, a term Freud coined in 1896. Psychoanalysis became a recognized branch of psychology, which strove to uncover the hidden secrets in the subconscious mind that created disorders in the conscious mind, and had several famous followers, including Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, and Anna Freud (Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979: 17-40).

Always Beautiful, But Never Pretty (Nicolson, 2000: 5)

"What's it like to be a child?" Virginia Woolf had once asked Nigel Nicolson, the son of her long-time friend Vita Sackwell-West, as they spent an afternoon catching butterflies.

"Well, Virginia, you know what it's like," Nicolson had said. "You've been a child yourself."

"It's not much use thinking back to my childhood because little girls are different than little boys."

Woolf's answer must have surprised Nicolson because it prompted him to ask, "But were you happy as a child?" (Nicolson, 2000: 1-2)

Although Nicolson was not able to recall what Woolf had answered that day, Woolf's childhood was tainted with the early death of her parents, mental breakdowns, and sexual abuse. Unlike Freud's upbringing, Woolf was in constant competition for parental attention among her siblings and half-siblings, totaling eight children in all. This was in addition to the constant presence of extended family members coming in and out of the household.

Virginia Woolf was born on January 25, 1882 as Adeline Virginia Stephen. She took her place in a family of beauties that could trace a maternal history going back to the inner courts of Marie Antoinette ("*Virginia Woolf*": 2012: 2). Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen, modeled for Pre-Raphaelite artists Edward Burne-Jones and G. F. Watts and photographer Julie Margaret Cameron, Woolf's aunt (Hussey, 1995: 267). Julie Stephen's demanding schedule, which also included the management of the household and the children as well as modeling, made quality time that Woolf was able to spend with her mother

nearly obsolete. Even in the few moments between mother and daughter, Woolf wrote almost with an audible sigh, “someone was always interrupting” (Briggs, 2005: 37).

If it was from her mother that Woolf received her beauty, then it was from her father that she inherited her love of literature. Leslie Stephen was a man of letters, articles, and a critic, who saw in Virginia a protégé and his literary successor (Hill, 1981: 351). Intent on overseeing his youngest daughter’s instruction in the literary arts, Leslie Stephen guided Woolf’s studies in history and biography, although Woolf would have rather preferred a formal education instead of “mooning about alone among my father’s books” (Nicolson, 2000: 10). Nonetheless, this early training not only influenced Woolf later as a writer, but also guided her path as a novelist (Hill, 1981: 351). Although Leslie Stephen was often viewed as rigid and detached, Woolf was partial to her father over her mother (Hussey, 1995: 271). Leslie Stephen’s mention of his “little Ginia” in his letters to Julie Stephen, one in which he expressed his opinion that Woolf would do well as an author (Hill, 1981: 351), may have suggested that the two shared a similar sentiment toward one another. Yet despite this initial connection, Woolf’s view and her affections of her father would later change (Nicolson, 2000: 7).

By all accounts, Woolf’s early childhood, which was full of books and storytelling (Briggs, 2011: 111), was fairly idealistic until her home life dramatically altered with the death of her mother in 1895 when Virginia was 13 years old. Leslie Stephen was unable to recover from the loss. Therefore, management of the household fell to Woolf’s half sister Stella, who died two years later (Briggs, 2011: 12-13) and left Vanessa Bell, Woolf’s elder sister, with the responsibility of the home (Nicolson, 2000: 10). It was also around this time that Woolf had her first mental breakdown and her relationship with her father began to dissolve. Woolf started experiencing feelings of “rage and frustration” toward her father as time passed on and she felt more and more like a prisoner in the home (Nicolson, 2000: 9). When Leslie Stephen died in 1904 from abdominal cancer, Woolf, now 22 years old, experienced a subsequent breakdown and underwent professional care. During her treatment, Woolf attempted suicide by jumping from a second story window. The window was too low to cause her serious harm and Woolf eventually recovered from her breakdown (Brigg, 2011: 38). Despite all this, Woolf must have felt a sense of tremendous relief following the death of her father. Unlike Woolf’s mother, whose death was unexpected and sudden, her father’s decline was a slow, agonizing process for not only him, but her entire family. “If only it could be quicker,” Woolf had written to her friend, Violet Dickerson, two months before Leslie Stephen passed away (Nicolson, 2000: 15). Consequently, it was only after the death of her father that Woolf experienced the freedom to pursue her own interests, especially those involving her ambitions as a

writer, evidenced by Woolf’s reflection in the following passage:

Father’s birthday. He would have been ... 96, like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;—inconceivable (Hussey, 1995: 271).

Shortly after Woolf recovered, she moved with her sister, Vanessa Bell, and her brothers, Adrian and Thoby Stephen, from their childhood home at Hyde Park Gate to Bloomsbury where Woolf met and married Leonard Woolf on August 10, 1912 (Briggs, 2005: 21). Woolf wanted to have children, but Leonard Woolf did not think that she could physically or mentally handle having them given her history of mental illness. Instead, Leonard Woolf wanted Woolf to focus on other things that could fulfill her. This train of thought resulted in Woolf completing her first novel, *A Voyage Out* (Briggs, 2005: 41), and later co-founding Hogarth Press (Nicolson, 2000: 63).

Even though Woolf had listened to her husband and abandoned the idea of children, it was a decision she regretted. Interestingly, Woolf did not blame her mental illness, but rather she blamed her weakness for not being able to control its effects on her. Woolf had written, “A little more self-control on my part, and we might have had a boy of 12, a girl of 10: This always rakes me wretched in the early morning hours” (Briggs, 2005: 41). Woolf’s realization of her ability to have some semblance of control over her mental health would become important later in her life.

The Freud/Woolf Standoff

When Freud came into notoriety with his past cocaine addiction, his theories about sons wanting to take sexual possession of their mothers and the daughters of their fathers, and claims that sex was the root cause of every psychosis known to man, Woolf was far from impressed. Matter of fact, she called him an imbecile.

We are publishing Dr Freud, and I glance at the proof and read how Mr. A. B. threw a bottle of red ink on to the sheets of his marriage bed to excuse his impotence to the housemaid, but threw it in the wrong place, which unhinged his wife’s mind, and to this day she pours claret on the dinner table. We could all go on like that for hours; and yet these Germans think it proves something besides their own gull-like imbecility (Briggs, 2005: 3).

Woolf not only believed Freud’s theories meritless, she also did not think it would be taken seriously by the public. She had commented to Roger Fry, a long-time friend, that she only expected Freud’s books to sell because the psychologist had cancer² (Broughton, 1987:

152).

Leonard Woolf, on the other hand, was already a big follower of Freud, having read the psychologist's work since 1914, and gave no thought to paying £800 for Hogarth to publish Freud's manuscripts in England. When it finally arrived, Woolf described Freud's volumes of writing as "dumped in a fortress the size of Windsor Castle in ruins upon the floor," with Miss Higgs, their assistant, "undaunted and garrulous above the battlements" (Briggs, 2005: 3).

Despite Woolf's complaints, Hogarth Press published Freud's work in 1924 (Broughton, 1987: 152) and Leonard Woolf reported to the *New Weekly* of being "rather proud of having in 1914 recognized and understood the greatness of Freud and the importance of what he was doing" (Briggs, 2005: 2). Interestingly, Leonard Woolf did not mention to the *New Weekly* the manner in which he discovered Freud, which happened to be by chance. During that time, Leonard Woolf was continually researching mental illness to assist Woolf in eradicating her depression. In that investigation, he had happened upon Freud and his budding new field of psychoanalysis. For whatever reason, Leonard Woolf did not see Freud's theories as a possible explanation to Woolf's illness, but saw potential in the psychologist nonetheless (Briggs, 2011: 46).

Even with Leonard Woolf's immense interest in Sigmund Freud, Woolf refused to take any notice of Freud's work unless it was the occasional glance at the proofs (Broughton, 1987: 152). She called it "Freud's fiction," because it bundled the emotional and the inner psyche into a matter of sex. It filtered everything down into its simpler explanations, instead of exploring the complexity of thought. Woolf wrote, "They would say she kept her sorrow, suppressed her secret-her sex, they'd say the scientific people. But what flummery to saddle her with sex!" (Briggs, 2005: 3) Since Woolf struggled with her own body image in addition to sexuality (Briggs, 2011: 37-39), it was no wonder that "sex" would not be a sufficient argument for her. Woolf had posed the question of "how far should [novelists] allow themselves to be influenced by the discoveries of the psychologist?" (Broughton, 1987: 152) Undoubtedly at that time, she would have answered, "Not at all."

The Freudian slip

Although Woolf may have insisted that she never read or studied any of Freud's work and that she was completely ignorant of it, she could not fight the avalanche that was Sigmund Freud. She still heard about his theories if only, as Woolf stated, "merely from superficial talk" (Broughton, 1987: 152). Even though the first of Freud's seven-volume collection had yet to be published by Hogarth Press, Leonard Woolf had started negotiations for his work by 1921. By this time, Woolf was well aware of

Freud and his theories long before she penned, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself," on February 20, 1924. Although Freud was responsible for several theories that contributed to the field of psychoanalysis, the two main theories that will be explained for the intention of this paper will be that of hysteria and depression.

By this time, Freud had already developed the seduction theory,³ which was an idea that underlying all repressed memories was latent childhood sexual trauma from either a parent or other adult and that these repressed memories turned into hysteria after puberty (Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979: 39). Hysteria was a popular diagnosis for women at that time. Symptoms of hysteria included acting erratically and/or experiencing unexplained ailments (paralysis, inability to speak, memory issues, etc) in the absence of other overt physical causes (Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979: 17). It was believed that the cause of hysteria was due to a dysfunction in the uterus; however, Freud was the first to argue that it was a psychological issue of traumatic origin (Hergenhahn, 2001: 464).

As far as depression, Freud theorized that depression was the result of loss, such as in the case of losing a loved one, combined with subconscious residuals of hatred toward the deceased. When individuals were unable to direct their hatred toward the departed because they felt immense guilt by doing so, they directed it toward themselves. This internalization of hatred caused depression and it did not matter if the loss was real (an actual death) or imagined (losing the lottery). Freud theorized the resulting depression would be the same as long as the individual was unable to process the guilt associated with feelings of hate (Comer, 2001: 202). When this occurred, the individual would regress to the anal stage, which was one of Freud's five stages of psychosexual development, as a coping mechanism. The anal stage generally occurred roughly between years 1 to 3 and consisted of biting, spitting, and defecating while the mood alternates between affection and aggression (Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979: 142).

The talking cure

In treating patients, Freud was particularly fond of a technique called free association. Through free association, the patient rattled off whatever came to mind while Freud connected the thoughts into a central idea (Hergenhahn, 2001: 464). The trick of free association was to find the theme of the patient's thoughts and then to keep digging until that theme revealed the hidden trauma (Comer, 2001: 56). It was only when the underlying trauma was brought to the surface, the subconscious becoming conscious, that the patient was able to work through the trauma and return to a sense of normalcy.

Woolf may or may not have realized that she also employed a very similar technique to Freud's free association while she wrote *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf was an advocate of recounting the accuracies of real life as seen through the characters. Internal monologue or stream of consciousness narration was one method to do so because it would "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind ...[to] trace the pattern ... which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (Briggs, 2005: 132). By eliminating the narrator and allowing the character's thoughts to come at will without restriction, as with Freud's free association, the complexity of life was better able to come through the text. When this occurred, the character's life became a reflection of real life in all its confusion, muddiness, random connections, and so on. This, to Woolf, came closer to truth and Freud would have likely agreed.

Mrs Dalloway

Initially, *Mrs Dalloway* was to be written as a play rather than a novel. The plot, Woolf had devised, would consist of two people who were unaware of the other, but whose paths would eventually intersect although they would never physically meet. To Woolf, that was "the real exciting part" because it represented real life in all its uncertainties and broke away from the conformities of fiction at the time (Briggs, 2011: 130).

The result was the novel based on the character, Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, who had appeared in several of Woolf's earlier works. Mrs. Dalloway was initially introduced in Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out*, and then again in the short story "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street." After that, the character morphed into a novel with a storyline centered on a mid-June day in 1923.

Although the novel primarily focused on Mrs. Dalloway, who was a party-throwing socialite, there was a darker character tainting London that infamous day: Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked war hero in the midst of a psychotic break. By that time, the War Office Committee had already published a report on the effects of men returning from World War I. Collectively known as "shell shock," these effects manifested in such symptoms as tremors, heightened startle response, ravings, and catatonic states (Coffman, 1986: 224). Treatment for shell shock varied widely by rank, such as rest cures⁴ for officers or, for lower ranked soldiers, cigarette burns and electric shocks (Briggs, 2005: 146).

For the purposes of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf intended for both these characters in the novel to create a sense of contrast. Woolf said of Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus Smith that, "I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide: the world seen by the sane [Clarissa Dalloway] and the insane [Septimus Smith] side by side" (Briggs, 2011: 142). Although Woolf intended for the characters to be a "study," Mrs Dalloway and Septimus Smith share

several similar characteristics with Woolf's background, especially during the times when she had also hovered in the worlds of both the sane and insane. For this reason, and as other scholars of Woolf have commented, Mrs Dalloway offered the most insight to Woolf's mental illness. Furthermore, Woolf's analysis of the cause behind Septimus Smith's breakdown mirrored the current psychological theory of her day, particularly Freud's theories concerning loss, sexuality, and repressed memories.

The psychoanalysis of Septimus Smith

Septimus Smith had problems. He rambled to himself, saw things that were not there, including dead people; heard birds speaking Greek, and had to hold onto his wife's hand so that he would not fall from the couch into a pit of flames. By all accounts, Septimus Smith had all the classic symptoms of hysteria and had regressed to the point that "nothing could rouse him," going beyond being "in a funk," as his physician, Dr. Holmes, had put it⁵.

If Freud could have inserted himself into Mrs Dalloway, he would have had Septimus Smith lay down on his infamous couch, probably with a railing so his patient would feel better, and let Septimus Smith freely prattle on, which he had a tendency to do anyway. Using free association, Freud would have jotted down whatever key words he could extricate from Septimus Smith's word salad. At some point, Freud would have uncovered that Septimus Smith was extremely upset about the death of his friend, Evans, and instead of acknowledging his grief; Septimus Smith was becoming increasingly emotionless and apathetic.

... when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him ... for now that it was over, truce signed, and the dead buried, he had, especially in the evening these sudden thunder-claps of fear. He could not feel (Woolf, 1981: 86-87).

After revealing the source of Septimus Smith's breakdown, Freud would have further discovered that Septimus Smith had a clear disdain of sex with women, calling it a filthy business, while indicating that his relationship with Evans was little more than an intense camaraderie than anything overtly romantic. "He [Septimus Smith] drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name ... it was the case of two dogs playing on a hearth rug ... they had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other" (Woolf, 1981: 86). Freud would have concluded that it was not that Septimus Smith had no feelings, but that he had too much and could not fully

handle them. Septimus Smith had loved Evans. When Evans had died, Septimus Smith realized that he would “be forever alone” because of it (Woolf, 1981: 145). For this reason, the loss of Evans was a traumatic blow that Septimus Smith was unable to process.

Septimus Smith’s feelings of abandonment had turned into anger toward Evans for dying. Since Septimus Smith could not admit the nature of the relationship or his feelings of Evans leaving him, certainly not to his wife, he turned the anger onto himself. Once this happened, his anger transformed into depression and he regressed into the anal stage. And in the end, it boiled down to sex.

Had Freud been in the novel, he would have started working with Septimus Smith on addressing the loss of Evans and the feelings associated with it. He would have had Septimus Smith relive the relationship and examine each emotion like a scientist studying a germ stain under a microscope. Eventually, Freud would have gradually pulled Septimus Smith out of his hysteria and he would have grown less and less dependent on his wife, Lucrezia Smith. Following treatment, Septimus Smith would have gone on to live the rest of his days with Lucrezia Smith (or not), but he would have, at least, been able to sit in a park in peace without worrying about the birds talking to him.⁶

Unfortunately for Septimus Smith, Freud was not a character in *Mrs Dalloway*. Instead, Septimus Smith first received treatment by Dr. Holmes, who thought there was “nothing at all wrong with him,” pumped him full of bromide (a sedative), and told Septimus Smith to get a hobby. When that did not work, Lucrezia Smith took her husband to Sir William Bradshaw, “who had never had time for reading,” and as a result was likely unaware of Freud’s theories of hysteria, depression, and psychosexual development. Sir William Bradshaw diagnosed Septimus Smith with a breakdown, stating that it was a “moment” of depression, not depression itself, and that all Septimus Smith really needed was a rest cure (Woolf, 1981: 97). As it turned out, the rest cure was a failure. It did not address Septimus Smith’s underlying issue (the loss of Evans) and it took his mental illness toward the breaking point. Septimus Smith started to view those trying to help him, like in the case of Dr. Holmes, as enemies and the act of suicide was no longer an option but a necessity.

He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings-what did they want? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. “I’ll give it to you!” He cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer’s area railing (Woolf, 1981: 149).

The double lives of Virginia Woolf

E.M. Forster, a friend of Woolf’s, had made the comment that *Mrs. Dalloway* was “written from [Woolf’s] personal

experience” and there were many characters, circumstances, and events that rang true to Woolf’s history. Although this may be true, the main difference between *Mrs. Dalloway* and other memoirs hidden in fiction like Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* was that, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf explored the threads of her experiences to their finality. For this reason, the work was a fictional creation of Woolf, but the similarities within the novel are important to note.

One of these similarities were the characters Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway, who Woolf stated were “doubles” of each other (Howard xi, 1981). Although this may be true, these characters could also be viewed as the double images of Woolf. On one hand, we had Woolf as Clarissa Dalloway, the “lady at ease” and the London socialite with her duties of the house, her two servants, and the mundane details associated with being a wife (Briggs, 2005: 136). Clarissa Dalloway also represented the artist in the act of creation, which in this case was the construction of the party that both started and concluded the novel (Lord, 1999: 38). On the other hand, we had Woolf as Septimus Smith, the “creative soul” that suffered from spells of debilitating depression. In the novel, Woolf made a point that these two characters would never physically meet, as mentioned before, and this idea would come into play in Woolf’s life as well. Just like with multiple personality, which is clinically known as Dissociative Identity Disorder, the individual personalities would be unaware of each other even though they are expressed through the same person (National Alliance on Mental Health 2001). The part of Woolf that represented Septimus Smith and that of Clarissa Dalloway would also never meet because when Woolf became Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith would be hidden and vice versa.

Since Woolf was an advocate to writing true to life and she intended *Mrs. Dalloway* to be a study of insanity and suicide, it could be argued that she buried into Septimus Smith her own experiences with mental illness. In the novel, the symptomatology of Septimus Smith’s breakdown included hallucinations,⁷ extreme states of excitability,⁸ and bouts of anger.⁹ Woolf’s mental illness was also documented with such events as birds communicating in Greek (an event Septimus Smith also experienced), Edward VII uttering obscenities within the foliage, Woolf insulting those closest to her, and a subsequent suicide attempt by leaping from a window (Nicolson, 2000: 19). In deleted lines from the original manuscript of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf added other similarities between herself and Septimus Smith. For example, Woolf had described that her mental illness made her “mind squint so badly” and that Septimus Smith “squinted too.” She later went on to explain, “it was his [Septimus Smith’s] eyes that were terrible” therefore changing “squinting” from a metaphor that depicted her mental illness to a physical symptom (Briggs, 2011: 146).

One of the more interesting moments in *Mrs. Dalloway* was when Mrs. Dalloway heard of Septimus Smith’s

death and, although she never knew him, Mrs. Dalloway commented:

The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on ... But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad he had done it; thrown it away (186).

Here, the two worlds of the characters blurred, where one life rippled into the other, and the curtain between them could no longer keep the personalities separated. Of further interest was that Clarissa Dalloway agreed with Septimus Smith's decision. At this point, it could be said that these two characters were no longer doubles of each other, but of one clear mind. This idea would contain certain prophetic fingerprints in Woolf's future, but before her own two worlds blurred together on March 28, 1941, Woolf would first step into her own past with the aid of Sigmund Freud.

“Dr. Freud Gave Me a Narcissus” (Bell, 1984: 202).

Floriography was a popular method of communication in Europe when words were unable to express true sentiment. Red roses symbolized passionate love, dandelions stood for loyalty, and blue violets represented faithfulness (Victorian Bazaar, 2000; 1-11). Freud must have put his own spin on this tradition because when Woolf sat in his study one blustery day on January 28, 1939 at 20 Maresfield Gardens, Freud presented to her a narcissus flower, which could have been interpreted as: “Madame, I am afraid you are beyond all clinical help.” Since Woolf did not read or feign any desire to read any of Freud's work, she would have had no idea that Freud had coined the term “narcissistic” for individuals whose psychoses lay beyond the reach of psychological intervention and, in essence, were untreatable (Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979: 130).

In Woolf's diary, she described the meeting between her, Leonard Woolf, and Freud as a “difficult talk. An interview” while Freud sat “in a great library with little statues at a large scrupulously tidy shiny table” and “we like patients on chairs” (Bell, 1984: 202). As for Freud, who described himself as “infamous rather than famous,” Woolf portrayed him as “a screwed up shrunk very old man: with a monkey's light eyes, paralysed spasmodic movements, inarticulate: but alert” (Bell, 1984: 202).

Although one could imagine an interesting range of discussions that Woolf and Freud could have had together, the main topics of conversation were the impending war with Germany (World War II had not officially started yet), the actions of Hitler, and Freud's recent relocation to England from Austria with the aid of his benefactor Princess Marie Bonaparte (Bell, 1984: 202). Freud had asked both Virginia and Leonard Woolf, “What are you going to do? The English-war” (Bell, 1984:

202), but the talk of war and Freud's account of fleeing Austria must have felt like dour subjects to Woolf, who commented, “all refugees are like gulls with their beaks out for possible crumbs” (Bell, 1984: 202). In the end, the one and only face-to-face meeting between Sigmund Freud and Virginia Woolf was, more or less, uneventful, leaving Woolf with this impression of Freud: “Immense potential, I mean an old fire now flickering” (Bell, 1984: 202).

“Now I'm Going to Read Freud” (Bell, 1984: 266).

Freud was notorious for his love of cigars and he was rarely photographed without one in hand, but his long-term addiction to nicotine eventually led to his death. He developed oral cancer and underwent repeated surgeries, 33 in all, including one that required the use of “the Monster,” a contraption of metal that separated his oral and nasal cavities (Reef, 2001: 112). Freud was wearing “the Monster” the day he had met Woolf on January 28, 1939.

When Freud realized that he was never going to recover from another reoccurrence of cancer, he had asked his physician, Max Schur to help him commit suicide. Starting on September 21, 1939 and over the course of two days, Schur gave him 21 milligrams of morphine and Freud died on September 23, 1939. The day following Freud's death, Woolf appeared seemingly unaffected, writing in her diary: “Freud is dead, the stop press says. Only these little facts interrupt the monotonous boom of the war” (Bell, 1984: 238). Nonetheless, it was shortly following Freud's death that she took an interest in his work, which was also around the same time that she was working on *Roger Fry: A Biography*. Of note, Woolf had been going through Roger Fry's letters and had come across a reference to herself as being anal.¹⁰ This reference may have been the catalyst that propelled Woolf in rethinking her objection to Freud's work, at the very least, to find out precisely what her friend, Fry, had meant by that term (Broughton, 1987: 156). Regardless of Woolf's motivation, her diary entries show it was at this time that she started reading Freud, whom she had published nine years before.

Saturday 2 December 1939. Began reading Freud last night; to enlarge the circumference. to give my brain a wider scope: to make it objective; to get outside. Thus defeat the shrinkage of age. Always take on new things. Break the rhythm and c (Bell, 1984: 248).

Friday 8 December 1939. Shopping-tempted to buy jerseys and so on. I dislike this excitement. Yet enjoy it. Ambivalence as Freud calls it. (I'm gulping up Freud) (Bell, 1984: 249).

Saturday 9 December 1939. Freud is upsetting: reducing one to whirlpool; and I daresay truly. If we're all instinct, the unconscious, what's all this about civilisation, the

whole man, freedom, and c? (Bell, 1984: 250).

Thursday 27 June 1940. I tried to center by reading Freud (Bell, 1984: 299).

Of particular interest, the 1940 sections of Woolf's memoir *A Sketch of the Past* are seeped heavily in self-analysis, which she had wrote after reading Freud (Briggs, 2005: 369). In spite of the love/hate relationship she experienced in his work, Woolf made at least two psychological discoveries in her own personal history. The first was that her novel, *To the Lighthouse*, was an exploration of her feelings toward her mother. Woolf had concluded that it was only after she had thoroughly explored her feelings through the character Mrs. Ramsey, who like Julia Stephen was a mother of eight; she stopped being haunted by them. This was evidenced when Woolf wrote, "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" (Briggs, 2005: 5).

The second was addressing her childhood anxiety over her body and the sexual abuse she experienced by her half-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth. When Woolf was a child, she felt compelled to stare at herself in the mirror and saw "a horrible face ... the other face in the glass" and expressed confusion of her "tomboy nature" compared to her mother, who was beautiful and whose likeness was sought after by artists (Briggs, 2011: 352). Julia Stephen became an impossible ideal to achieve, and thus, Woolf used anorexia to punish her body for matters beyond her control (Briggs, 2005: 37).

Already stricken with a fragile body image, Woolf went on to recount the sexual abuse she underwent by her half-brothers. In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf described an incident when Gerald Duckworth lifted her onto a marble slab and "his hand explored my private parts" when she was around six to seven years old (Briggs, 2005: 352). As far as George Duckworth, who was the primary perpetrator of the abuse, Woolf depicted his behavior as "little better than a brute's" (Nicolson, 2000: 12). Some have argued that Woolf's childhood sexual abuse was the source of her mental illness, whereas others have minimized Woolf's disclosure, going so far as to indicate that it did not happen. Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew, had said, "In recollection, Virginia made more of a drama of the affair than the facts justify" (Nicolson, 2000: 13) and Nigel Nicolson, the same boy Woolf had spent the afternoon catching butterflies and talking about childhood had said, "The allegation is far-fetched" (Nicolson, 2000: 12). Regardless of what others believe, Woolf had indicated that these experiences "had spoilt her life for her before it had fairly begun" (Jouve, 2000: 3) and felt that it was important to recount the traumas she had kept secret.

The psychoanalysis of Virginia Woolf

Roger Fry had already concluded that Woolf was anal (Broughton, 1987: 156), but if Freud had been given the chance, there would have been no doubt that he would have also unearthed Woolf's childhood sexual abuse, history of anorexia, and her conflicted relationship with her mother and her father through therapy. For these reasons, he would not have been the least bit surprised that Woolf suffered from periods of depression among other psychotic neuroses. After all, Freud had already hypothesized at least two theories in his earlier work in psychoanalysis that could have likely explained the contributing factors to Woolf's mental health and this explanation would have similar findings to the earlier psychoanalysis of Septimus Smith.

Due to his research on hysteria, Freud may have theorized that the first issue was that Woolf had been unable to process the sexual trauma of her childhood. Since Woolf's mental health treatment primarily consisted of rest cures, her past abuse would have been left untreated and repressed in her subconscious. In doing so, the memories of her abuse would have festered in Woolf conscious, waking mind, creating unintended physical effects, such as insomnia, incessant talking, and acts of violence (Briggs, 2005: 45).

Second, further analysis would have revealed that two of Woolf's mental breakdowns occurred shortly following the deaths of her mother and her father. Documentation of Woolf's earlier childhood revealed that the relationship she had with her parents was maybe not so much abusive but conflicted to say the least. If this was true, then Freud may have speculated that Woolf harbored feelings of hatred toward her parents that she was unable to properly express, but felt nonetheless. She would have experienced guilt at having these feelings about her mother and father and, with that in mind, Woolf did report feeling immense guilt following her father's death because she believed she had not done enough for him (Briggs, 2011: 38). If Woolf were unable to process the guilt associated with her underlying feelings of hatred, Freud would have concluded that she would internalize the depression and her psyche would begin the rapid regression into the anal stage of development.

Another key point was that Woolf experienced a severe mental breakdown after completing her novel *The Voyage Out*, but she also encountered subsequent depressive symptoms each time she completed a novel (Briggs, 2005: 41). Here, Freud would have explained that the loss was "symbolic," and despite its imagined basis, the resulting breakdown would have created the same real symptomatic effect. "It is the novel which has broken her up," Jean Thomas, the proprietor of Twickenham nursing home had written "... [Woolf] could not sleep and thought everyone would jeer at her" (Briggs, 2011: 41). Woolf's dread of criticism over her work, although only perceived criticism, created the

symbolic loss and the feelings of hatred associated with losing something important to her. Unable to direct these emotions, her anger and loss turned inward, perpetuating the depression.

“L. is Doing the Rhododendrons ...” (Bell, 1984: 359)¹¹ Woolf must have thought of the manner of her suicide long before she had undertaken it. In an eerily prophetic statement by Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*, “Suddenly he [Septimus Smith] said, ‘Now we will kill ourselves,’ when they were standing by the river (66),” Woolf had placed a large rock in her pocket, walked into the Ouse River on March 28, 1941, and drowned. Three weeks had passed before some children playing by the river eventually discovered her body on April 18, 1941 (Nicolson, 2000: 190-191).

Woolf believed she had some measure of control over her mental illness and took steps to manage her symptoms. For instance, she knew that after finishing a novel, she often began to suffer signs of depression, so she ensured she had a new project that she could immediately start work to distract herself from the encroaching depression (Briggs, 2005: 395). This method had seemed to work for Woolf as evidenced by her numerous accomplishments as a writer, but this begs the question: What happened to Woolf in 1941?

She left no clues in her suicide note about the reasons behind her decision, only writing that she “feel[s] certain that I am going mad again ... And I shan’t recover this time” (Nicolson, 2000: 189). Nonetheless, the reason behind Woolf’s decision may be found in the argument Septimus Smith made to his wife, Lucrezia Smith, to commit suicide in *Mrs Dalloway*:

He would argue with her about killing themselves; and explain how wicked people were; how he could see them making up lies as they passed in the street. He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the meaning of the world, he said (66).

Around that time, Nazi Germany was in the height of its power, food was being rationed, and bombs were raining on Woolf’s beloved London. Her despair during this time was evident in her comment, “We have no future” (Briggs, 2005: 397). What was more, Woolf had connected her last major breakdown to World War I despite it occurring a year before the war started, so it may seem that the encroaching threat of invasion by the Nazis triggered her fear of facing another debilitating breakdown (Briggs, 2005: 398). Also of note was Woolf’s awareness of the number of other novelists, playwrights, painters, pacifists, and poets who had committed suicide around that same time, some whom were her friends (Briggs, 2005: 398-399). As Septimus Smith had argued, Woolf may have been experiencing the wickedness in people.

Not only was Woolf dealing with a greater societal

upheaval, but personally she was suffering with an extreme case of writer’s block. Concerned, Woolf had commented both to her doctor and to a friend of her difficulty with writing (Nicolson, 2000: 187) and had further questioned around December 1940 if she would “ever write again one of those sentences that gives me intense pleasure?” (Briggs, 2005: 395) Whether it was the socio-political environment that caused her writers block or it was her writers block that intensified her worry of the political-social environment, the two combined appeared to be more than Woolf was able to bear, giving her the certainty that, this time, she was not going to recover.

In addition, there has been recent speculation that Freud might have been linked to Woolf’s decision to commit suicide. Since it was well known that Woolf had read Freud by the time of her death, it had been hypothesized that Woolf may have connected the potential Nazi invasion to a “bodily invasion,” similar to that of the sexual abuse Woolf had experienced as a child (Jouve, 2000: 3). Woolf’s inability to relive that childhood trauma and Freud’s later denial that hysteria stemmed from childhood sexual abuse, may have given Woolf a sense that her experiences were not validated and/or believed by one of the greatest psychologists of her time. These feelings bred into a steadily deepening sense of doom in combination with the threat of another (physical) invasion (Jouve, 2000: 3). Although this was only a theory made chiefly by Woolf scholar Louise De Salvo, it is still of interest that the influence of Freud over Woolf could potentially continue even into her death.

The influence

Despite their backgrounds, Sigmund Freud had an impact on Virginia Woolf, both as a writer and as an individual. Although Woolf claimed to be completely ignorant of Freud’s work in the beginning, she could not help but be aware of his theories by way of her publisher Hogarth Press, which published Freud; or through the media. As it were, Woolf had acknowledged to having a surface knowledge of Freud from publisher proofs and idle conversation. While that could be the extent of it, the frankness of her opinions, such as in the case of Mr. A.B. throwing the bottle of ink, might indicate that perhaps she had a deeper knowledge of Freud’s work than she was willing to admit at that time.

Regardless of how much Woolf may or may not have known, it is of interest that the two shared a similar technique of finding truth. Freud’s free association and Woolf’s stream of consciousness narration were both methods of arriving at truth, whether that truth was a patient’s repressed memory or the inner motivations of a character. Possibly it was because both Freud and Woolf were interested in truth that Woolf’s conclusion of Septimus Smith’s mental illness in *Mrs Dalloway* mirrored

that of Freud's theories of hysteria, loss, and depression. Going further, it could be speculated that the truth that Woolf so desperately sought in Mrs Dalloway was the one that rippled into her earlier experiences and offered the first clue to the cause of her breakdowns: loss.

When Woolf did decide to study Freud, she was able to further extrapolate the source of her loss by self-analyzing her experiences with her parents and the sexual abuse by her stepbrothers. By doing so, this gave Woolf an outlet to address her own underlying trauma, which was "her frankest exploration of memory, her boldest journey into the interior" (Briggs, 2005: 369). For these self-discoveries, she owed to Freud, who at the very least, gave her his understanding of psychoanalysis to explore the past¹². Perhaps it was for this reason that she had changed her opinion a bit on the late Freud when she wrote: "By analysing themselves, with help from Fr. Freud, these writers have done a great deal to free us from nineteenth-century suppressions" (Broughton, 1987: 153).

In the end, the extent of Freud's influence over Woolf can only be speculated. On some level, he had an impact on Woolf as shown earlier, but perhaps his influence stretched as far as effecting the decision of her death as others have hypothesized. Ultimately, only Woolf would know for sure and if she were asked of Freud and his influence on her life, perhaps she might just laugh and say, "What a lark! What a plunge!"¹³.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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¹ Sigi was Sigmund Freud's nickname given to him by his mother.

² At the time of Woolf's comment, Freud was undergoing one of several series of oral cancer (Reef 112).

³ Freud later recounted the Seduction Theory because of his patients' numerous accounts of sexual abuse by their fathers. Freud found it impossible that these men, primarily respectable men, could be the sole reason for the overwhelming amount of hysteria cases. Instead, he attributed his patients' memories to fantasy (Reef 62).

⁴ Rest cures were an isolation-based therapy where patients were placed on bed rest for up to eight weeks (Allen 2).

⁵ Freud argued that men and women could suffer from hysteria; but, this idea did not resonate well among his male colleagues (Appignanesi & Zarate 23).

⁶ Septimus Smith's favorable prognosis was, of course, a best-case scenario where they are no other underlying issues affecting his mental health. Despite his best efforts, Freud was unable to cure everyone as in the famous case of Anna O (Appignanesi & Zarate 32-33).

⁷ Septimus Smith had numerous visual hallucinations, including seeing the deceased Evans and a woman's head in the ferns (66).

⁸ While in such a state, Lucrezia Smith commented that Septimus Smith would want her to write down his thoughts, which she said were "perfect nonsense" (67).

⁹ Reflecting on the difficulties of her marriage, Lucrezia Smith criticized that Septimus Smith could "say hard, cruel, wicked things" (65).

¹⁰ When Woolf came across this reference, she had been reading letters from Fry addressed to her sister, Vanessa Bell. At the time that Fry wrote the letters, he had referenced Freud several times and expressed his reactions and thoughts to the psychologist's theories and concepts, including Freud's descriptions of "anal" personalities (Broughton 155-156).

¹¹ This was the last line in Woolf's diary dated March 24, 1941, four days before committing suicide.

¹² While Freud's theories of psychoanalysis were both innovative and thought provoking for their time, they have since been the object of criticism and debate: Namely because the nature of psychoanalysis makes it difficult to independently research and verify for effectiveness. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Freud offered a major contribution toward the ongoing evolution in the field of psychology and his work continues to have value in present day (Comer 58-59).

¹³ This line of attributed dialogue was taken from the first page of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Related Journals:

