*Virginia Woolf's mental illness may have ultimately defined her craft—one that rejected convention in a decades-long attempt to portray the very character of consciousness.*

# Many Minds in One

How Virginia Woolf's bipolar illness affected her creativity

By Richard E. Cytowic, MD MFA

Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* opens in opposition, with a fragment of conversation already in progress: "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," says Mrs. Ramsay to her son James. "But," contradicts his father two paragraphs later, "it won't be fine" [1].

The novel is unbalanced from its first line. Within the first four paragraphs, points of view shift among mother, son, and father; then an omniscient voice reveals the thoughts of all three members of the Ramsay family, "that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that" (3). "That great clan" is perhaps a nod to Woolf's extended family that sometimes had difficulty in keeping subject and object separate.

Recently I read Woolf's entire oeuvre chronologically and noted opposition throughout: tensions between public and private; alienation versus belonging; nature versus man–made artifice; inner time versus the imposed timekeeping of Big Ben's hours. Character doubles such as Clarissa and Septimus, the loving–hating Isa and Giles, the masculine and feminine personas of Orlando, or the male–female pairs in *The Waves* are conventionally read as complementary aspects of temperament that reflect an internal discord within a character. In *The Waves,* Woolf actually trebles this device by refracting six separate consciousnesses into one mind, the biographer Bernard. She also liked ambiguity and inconclusiveness, something she borrowed from Russian writers such as Chekhov and Dostoevsky [2]. When ambiguities in the text allow for alternate readings, she declines to take sides.

Could such opposing attitudes reflect Woolf's own considerable ambivalence? Do the author's real-life equivocations echo in the indecisiveness of her fictional characters and her inconclusive plot arcs? In her diaries, Woolf regularly described a recurrent "madness," referring to the disruptive mood swings that plagued her career and ultimately led to her suicide. As a doctor who has studied neurological disorders for 35 years, I recognize such periodic and cyclical fluctuations as manic–depressive illness, or bipolar affective disorder.

Woolf creatively plays with two prime forces behind her bifurcated self, most easily seen in *To The Lighthouse*: a fragile sense of ego in relation to those of her parents (portrayed by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay), and self–doubt as an artist (Woolf herself as portrayed by Lily Briscoe). It is hard to keep hold of this thread across her works given that the structures of her novels differ dramatically. It is nearly impossible to fit them into a coherent attitude one might call Woolf's theory of art. Judging by the diverse Woolf scholarship that exists instead of a consensus, I am not alone.

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And that might be the point: Woolf could not piece herself together when unpredictable mental illness fragmented her world. "Virginia could be a very enchanting person," said *Vogue* editor Madge Garland, "but there were times when I felt that she was more nearly *enchanted*" [qtd. in 3]. When depressed, Woolf took to bed and withdrew, viewing the world as empty, meaningless, and without hope. On the upswing to mania she wrote at breakneck speed, the words seeming to compose themselves.

In her autobiographical essay, "A Sketch of the Past" (published in *Moments of Being),* Woolf claims that *To the Lighthouse* came out "in a great, apparently involuntary, rush … Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind." Like others in the throes of mania, she did not feel herself the author of her own thoughts, but an agent of another consciousness: "my lips seemed syllabling of their own accord as I walked. What blew the bubbles? … I have no notion" [4].

At these heightened times Woolf needed to know every detail of people's lives. The novelist Christopher Isherwood reports how engaged and social Woolf was during her elevated states:

> We are at tea table. Virginia is speaking with gaiety, delicate malice and gossip—the gossip which is the style of her books and which made her the best hostess in London; listening to her, we missed appointments, forgot love–affairs, stayed on into the small hours, when we had to be hinted, gently, but firmly, out of the house.

Creative individuals with both depression and bipolar disorder are most productive when their affective symptoms are under good control, and Woolf did not in fact write when she was acutely ill. Because the distorted thinking style of bipolar individuals persists even when they are neutrally poised between mania and depression, Woolf lived through long stretches in that exhilarated state most people experience only briefly, most often during creative episodes or when in the thrall of romance [5]. In such exalted states the self feels enlarged and everything looks vivid and thrilling, leading one to read *meaning* and *portent* into events that may be merely coincidental. This tendency may be one reason Woolf's novels are strewn with odd, minute details that lure readers to hunt for significance in them. "Let us not take it for granted that life exists more in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" [6].

Critics and therapists often presume psychodynamic explanations of causation despite lack of evidence in Woolf's writing. The thinking goes that because the young Virginia was sexually abused, she portrayed the sexes as incommensurable, even misogynistic in the way Richard Dalloway is in *The Voyage Out* or Mr. Tansley acts in *Lighthouse*. The modern habit is to think about mental forces in terms of cause and effect,

and it assumes that certain conditions of her life must have affected her choice of subject matter.

What if instead one took a biological perspective and asked how the distorted perceptions and self–absorption typical of bipolar individual might have colored the thinking of one of the twentieth century's most celebrated authors? Recognized medical disorders do color thinking in certain ways. A partial list includes obsessive compulsive disorder, Tourette syndrome, temporal lobe and myoclonic epilepsies, autism, nutritional deficiencies such as pernicious anemia or pellagra, and thyroid, adrenal, pulmonary, liver, and renal disease [7].

A bipolar mind makes it hard to see others objectively, let alone distinguish facts from projections. Though Woolf would have confused subject and object most often during manic upswings, she also did so to varying degrees all the time.

From my perspective as a neurologist whose studies minds, and as a creative writer who imagines characters' inner lives, Virginia Woolf's mind is a marvel to behold. The autodidact's relentless experiments in fiction are astounding. No two books are alike. "Not this, not that," she seems to be saying as she rejects convention and hones her technique in a lifelong experiment to portray consciousness and the character of thought. Her ideas about the unreliability of language were prescient given what science now knows: that the very structure of human brains allows language to introspect only a fraction of consciousness.

Biology likewise confirms Woolf's intuition that "reality," a term she put in quotes, is contingent. We cannot know one another absolutely. "What solitary icebergs we are, Miss Vinrace! How little we can communicate!" says Richard Dalloway in *The Voyage Out* (75), while Terence Hewet is correct that "I say everything's different. No two people are in the least the same" (107). Reality is subjective because the brain is not a passive antenna for "objective data" impinging on it, as people often suppose. (Ironically, one of Woolf's famous pronouncements in "Modern Fiction" was, "Let us record the atoms as they fall.") Rather, each brain actively pursues what interests it, filtering the world in its uniquely subjective way. Genes prime a life while experience in a given culture contextualizes it.

This is why the Rashomon effect is evident in everyday life and not simply a literary device that Woolf happened to like. When eyewitnesses see a singular accident in singularly different ways, for example, each observer is adamant about the accuracy of his point of view. In "The Window" section of *Lighthouse,* Woolf slows down time over 124 pages to cinematically repeat a single day's events from the viewpoints of different characters. The metaphoric window lets us look *in* on a character's thoughts and *out* to the world as seen through their eyes. Perhaps Woolf intuitively grasped that incommensurable points of view are the norm, and do not happen only during highly charged events. Stories such as "The Mark on the Wall," the diaries, and Woolf's essays show her to be a fascinated and astute observer of her own mind.

Ruminating on one's thoughts is a typical pastime of depressives. In *The Waves*, Bernard asks, "When I say to myself, 'Bernard,' who comes?" Later, "Who am I? I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know" [8]. That Woolf intended to portray the six minds as melding into one is suggested by her use of the same diction and style for each character. The only dialogue tags, for example, are "he said/she said."

From my perspectives as a physician and writer, mental illness motivates her art more than supposed choices to rebel, prove herself, win parental approval, or other so–called

reasonable explanations. I'm led me to look not for preconceived reasons, but evidence of bipolar traits in Woolf's work.

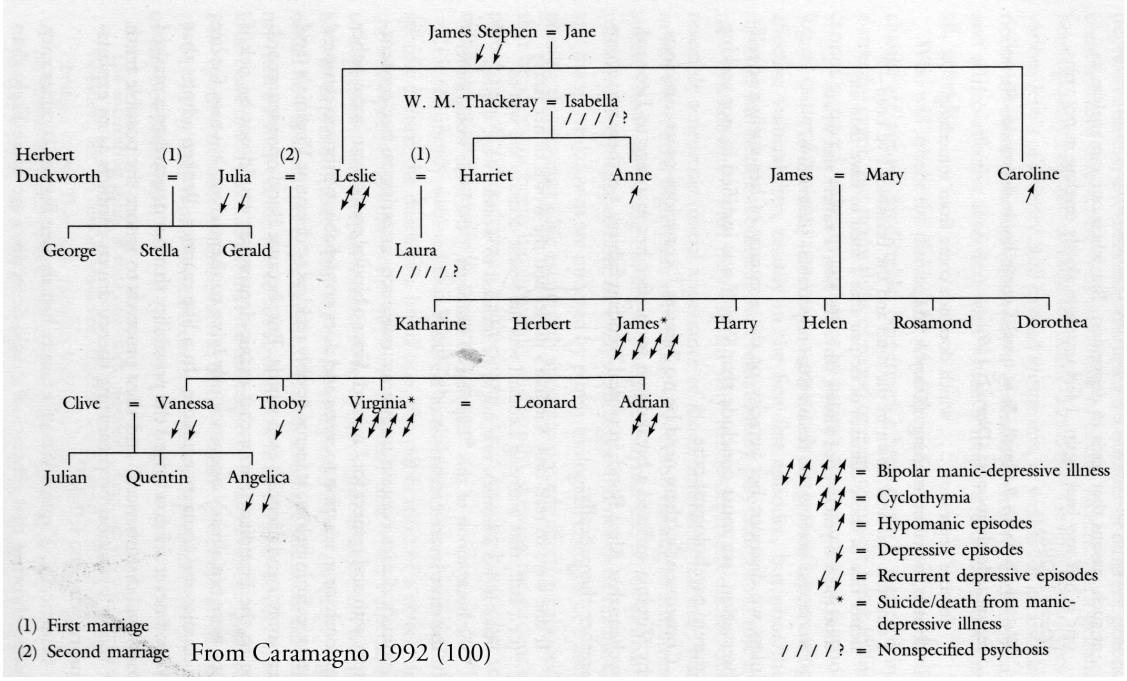
Start with her voluminous output. Bipolar disorder is one of several neurological illnesses characterized by incessant writing, or hypergraphia. Epilepsy, for example, appears to have contributed to both Dostoevsky's prolific output and his religious preoccupation (he claimed he would not trade ten years of life for a single spiritual ecstasy induced by his epilepsy) [9]. Religiosity and cosmic concerns are part of the behavioral profile [7]. Woolf's belief in a depersonalized union with the universe behind the veil of "cotton wool" she wrote about is consistent with this [4]. Furthermore, evidence of fluid boundaries Woolf saw between herself and other appear repeatedly: "I think writing, my writing, is a species of mediumship; I *become* the person" [10 my emphasis].


Page from Dostoevsky's notebook with notations of "The Devils," an example of hypergraphia with voluminous, meticulous writing, using every inch of the page. There are also signs of compulsive writing and hyperreligiosity (church drawing, transformation from "'Rachel" to "Raphael"). From Baumann et al.

Though letter writing was as common in Woolf's time as e–mail and texting are today, she exceed norms of her peers with reviews, novels (and their wholesale revisions), biographies, autobiographies, essays, correspondence, and 26 diary volumes in her own hand in which she wrote about what she was writing. She took up new experiments in narrative before finishing what she was working on, revised obsessively even after publication (which is why British and American editions differ in numerous small ways), and even took back *Between the Acts* from the printer: "I will revise it … I didn't realize how bad it was till I read it over" (qtd. in Briggs 391).

The genetic influence in bipolar disorder is well understood. Virginia and her manic cousin James were driven to suicide, and at least eleven individuals in the Stephens family suffered pathology of affect. Thomas Caramagno gives an exhaustive account of the family's affective illness; for Virginia, he provides a monthly "mood swing chart" spanning the years 1895 to 1941. He persuasively lays out her parents' maladaptive coping

response to loss, and the psychological stress that marked the family due to her father's tyranny and her mother's aloofness, to unpredictable and unstable temperaments within the immediate family, psychosis, and unexpected deaths [3].




Such dysfunction coupled with her own psychotic episodes made it hard for Woolf to separate her thoughts from those others' (e.g., hearing recurrent voices or, famously hearing the birds singing in Greek), or to *be sure of* what was real. She was at times violent, delusional, and incoherent. Given her assertion that the life of the mind was the only "real" life, the grip on what she called reality, must have felt tenuous.

She had what I would describe as a faulty theory of mind––a standard term describing a developing child's ability to attribute mental states to others that depends on what are called "mirror neurons." Though one canoe know others absolutely, once developed, our brains are good enough to infer what others might be thinking or feeling, allowing for empathy. Throughout her fiction Woolf dramatizes the challenge of separating self from others, a move that was both therapeutic and creative. On finishing *To The Lighthouse* she wrote, "I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose I did for myself what psycho–analysts do for their patients" [4].

Woolf's portrayal of psychic fragmentation anticipated the discovery that brains do have multiple domains of consciousness. The most relevant is what neuroscience calls the left–brain interpreter, a Bernard–like press secretary whose impulse is to *explain*. Its narrative is unreliable, however, for reasons outlined below.

How ironic that life should imitate the unreliable narrator of fiction.

We have long known that each brain hemisphere possesses a separate sensory–motor interface with the world. Different cognitive functions also lateralize, meaning that they reside in one hemisphere or the other. Language is usually a left–hemisphere function. Woolf thought deeply about the unreliability of language, but also about meaning, which is *not* restricted to the language hemisphere. These physiological facts are therefore germane.

In 1953, Roger Sperry and Robert Myers began the first split–brain research, cutting all the connections between the two hemispheres so that the two could no longer cross–communicate. This research, which helped Sperry earn a 1981 Nobel Prize, eventually proved that the two hemispheres have distinct ways of perceiving, speaking, thinking, and remembering. Each hemisphere possesses separate minds that differ in content, mode of organization, and their approach to problems. Each has a distinct personality and characteristic likes and dislikes. Accordingly, the *two hemispheres have similar, but not identical, concepts of self* with respect to past and future, family, culture, and social history.

These discoveries bear on Woolf's preoccupation with the self, which can be viewed as the net interaction between at least two distinct modes of perception. "Never was anyone so tossed up and down by the body as I am" [10]. Who was the "real" Virginia to such a buffeted person: the elated one, the despondent, the neutral woman in–between? She dramatized her inexplicable (thus meaningless) symptoms to render their complexity and ambiguity meaningful. Planning *Mrs. Dalloway* she said, "I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and insane side by side" [qtd. in 11]. Connecting either the two states, or her subjective and objective worlds, led to moments of being, "a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words." Yet three sentences later her narcissistic inability to separate self from object appears in the portentous claim that behind the "cotton wool" we are all connected to one another and the world of art. "We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" [4].

*Refusing to simplify life's complexities helped her and her readers see the sane and insane Virginia Woolf side by side.*

Woolf revealed her contrary selves in letters and diaries. But the counterintuitive reality of multiple minds in a single person is one most people resist given that they feel themselves a singular "me." Such a feeling is an illusion, however.

The idea that humans possess more than one mind, in a literal physical sense, was first suggested in 1844 by Arthur Wigan. In *The Duality of Mind*[12], he described the autopsy of someone he knew well in whom one brain hemisphere was entirely missing! Wigan had wits enough to deduce that a single hemisphere was enough to be a person. It implied that the brain is not a single organ of two halves, but a closely apposed pair just as the kidneys or lungs are paired one to a side. Wigan concluded that if one hemisphere was sufficient to have a mind then the customary pair made having two minds inevitable. His astute observation suggested an anatomical and physiological basis for why it is ourselves with whom we are most often at odds and "can't make up our minds."

Multiple lines of evidence confirm that the *act of doing* and the *feeling of doing it* are unrelated brain events. That is, being conscious of our actions does not equate with having caused them. Nonetheless, the subjective feeling that our thoughts do cause our actions is enough to override any amount of scientific preaching that their actual causes are generated unconsciously while memory–related circuits create a narrative to explain matters after the fact [13]. (Naysayers: see Daniel Wegner's *The Illusion of Conscious Will* for the evidence and argument.)

Like the magician's trick in which the audience never sees the actual contraptions and accomplices in its causal sequence, the real sequence of far flung brain events causing a behavior is greater than the sequence we can perceive. Yet we explain ourselves with, "I wanted to do it, so I did it," when the objective reality is, "My decision was determined by

internal forces I do not understand." Woolf's writings tell us that she sensed at times an agency that did not feel like herself.

Pertinent to "What blew the bubbles?" is the observation that highly creative persons often admit to not feeling like the source of their inspiration. Divided consciousness accounts for the detached feeling of not authoring very craft that others ascribe uniquely to them. When ordinary people are particularly clever they think, "Where did that come from?" Yet try to act cleverly and one often looks foolish. Unsummoned, insight and moments of wit feel different from the mental effort exerted when solving other problems.

The trouble is the left–brain interpreter's habit of explaining situations it had nothing to do with and consequently cannot understand. Its existence was first revealed by split–brain surgery, but the implications apply to everyone. In one famous experiment, a subject's left hemisphere saw one picture while his right hemisphere viewed a different one. Without speaking, he then had to pick from an array of pictures in full view of both hemispheres any associated with those that had been separately flashed to either side of his brain. In one setup, a chicken claw was flashed to the left brain while a snow scene was flashed to the right. The best matches from the full–view array were a chicken head for the claw and a shovel for the snow scene. As expected, the subject's left brain *did* pick the chicken head and his right brain the snow shovel.

When asked *why*, his left brain (where language is customarily located) explained correctly that the chicken went with the claw picture his left brain had seen. But how to explain the shovel? His left brain knows nothing about the snow scene but had observed his right brain, which cannot speak, choose the shovel. "Oh, that's simple," it piped up. "The chicken claw goes with the chicken, and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed."

The left brain falsely interpreted the right brain's choice in the context of its own limited knowledge, which lacked the right brain's understanding of the snow scene. The left–brain interpreter babbles away about things it knows nothing about, even in those with whole brains, because not everything inside one's head is accessible to language. One can, for example, restrict input to the right brain only and induce consciously felt feelings. The left–brain interpreter of course senses them and tries to rationalize feelings whose basis it cannot possibly comprehend. The experiment depends on the fact that there is normally a rapid and widespread neuronal response to emotional stimuli 170 milliseconds before those associated with conscious recognition.

We can flash a gruesome photograph to the right brain just long enough to stimulate the quick emotional pathway but not the slower circuits that lead to a conscious awareness of "seeing" it. Thus, when asked, subjects say they saw nothing or "a flash" at most. Nonetheless, they feel anxious or unsettled having emotionally registered the horrific photo. They do not and cannot possibly know *why* they feel the way they do. But the left–brain interpreter, which notices those feelings, tries to make sense of them yet its conclusions will be misleading because it is uninformed.

I can imagine Woolf struggling to find a stable identity in both the inner and surface worlds that her illness made more arbitrary, unpredictable, and inexplicable than most. She spoke of building "comfortable cocoons" of identity, but the unity of consciousness is as fictional as her novels. Ironically, in concurring with Woolf's prescient conviction about the unknowable other, it logically follows from the evidence I've laid out that readers can never know the "real" Virginia Woolf.

Given that a favorite theme was the impossibility of knowing another, perhaps the other not an actual person but another mute yet conscious self inside her, perhaps one of several. An auxiliary intelligence is not *unconscious* but rather *nonverbal* and accordingly

inaccessible to the left–brain's introspection. The interpreter's need for subjective consistency and narrative order—concerns that motivate Bernard in *The Waves*—recasts Woolf's literary experiments as attempts to bring coherence to her own disordered mind, what she called "scene making" [4]. (Parenthetically, her ambitious work predates by decades the "multiple intelligences" theory that Harvard educator Howard Gardner introduced in 1983 [14].)

Though one's multiple minds are usually coordinated, there are times when they are discrepant. Temporary discrepancies may be why the mentally ill hear voices, see hallucinations, or believe delusional thoughts. Woolf was synesthetic, and her perceptual sensitivity acute: decades after the fact she recorded early memories from St. Ives of "colour–and–sound," smell, touch, warmth, and shape [4]. My reading persuades me she had eidetic memory, too (popularly known as "photographic"), suggesting a basis for the minutely rendered details characteristic of her writing. By any measure her intelligence was extraordinary as was her skill in imagining fresh metonymies, metaphors, and similes. Could non–linguistic facets of Woolf's mind have made themselves known through such "illogical" devices? Could the inkling of another, hovering self have made Dostoevsky's idea of the double attractive enough to experiment with it in her own creations? Science can raise these questions but cannot answer them with surety.

In *To The Lighthouse,* relational issues that medicine calls transactional psychology appear, as do Woolf's efforts to resolve them. This essay opened by pointing out opposites in that novel. In *Lighthouse* Woolf intensifies tension through a triangle formed by Lily Briscoe and the two Ramsays, each person reflecting aspects of the other. Three separate attitudes ask in their own way, "What can it all mean? … What is the meaning of life?" (45, 161). The emotional Mrs. Ramsay and the intellectual Mr. Ramsay become synthesized in the aesthetic character of Lily Briscoe. What the triangle reflects is Woolf's synthesis of the same oppositional feelings in herself.

Early in the novel the narrator asks, "How did one judge people, think of them? How did one add up this and that and conclude that it was liking one felt, or disliking? And to those words, what *meaning* attached, after all?" (24, my emphasis). Judging is not an intellectual act, but has to do with feeling and assigning valence; not projecting onto the other, but striving to see the other realistically.

From the start, Lily's ideas about herself *qua* subject are rigidly egocentric in relation to the parental figures of the Ramsays *qua* objects. She sees them in fixed terms that mirror her own ambivalence: Mrs. Ramsay as idolized, and Mr. Ramsay as "that man [who] never gave; that man took" (49). (Perhaps this mirrors Woolf's views of her parents.) Lily cannot picture Mrs. Ramsay engaged in anything outside of her nurturing, maternal role, or imagine that Mr. Ramsay may actually love his children in his own way. Until she can get beyond that filter she cannot unite her ambivalent self and overcome her feelings of inadequacy. She cannot finish her painting—a metaphor for Woolf transforming her own fractured thoughts and feelings into something less maladaptive than "madness"––so long as her rigid thinking precludes a more playful and flexible attitude toward the other. This is a crucial skill for any artist.

Lily's self–regard as second rate keeps her from living the actualized artist's life she desires. Her painting "would never be seen; never be hung even, and there was Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, 'Women can't paint, women can't write'." The phrase "can't paint" repeats numerous times throughout the novel, suggesting that Lily has internalized a sense of diminishment, a response typical of chronic depressives like

Woolf. What Lily needs is perspective. "So much depends on distance" (191), or what the humorless Dr. Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* calls "a sense of proportion."

Lily's initial painting of mother and child is not representative, but abstract. She must step back and get a new perspective if she is to see her subject (literally, her *object*) as it is and not as her own anxieties distort it. To do so, she must re–evaluate all her relationships, because "half one's notions of other people were, after all, grotesque. They served private purposes of one's own … a whipping boy." Then, "If she wanted to be serious about [Tansley] she had to … look at him through [Mrs. Ramsay's] eyes" (197). This is an excellent prescription for cognitive therapy: rehearsing one's relations between subject and object. Woolf administered herself the same medication by fictionalizing boundary issues between self and other, segregating in the process her projections from real persons.

What should one make of Lily's remarkable drive to solve "the relations of [the] masses?" (53). Though not literally, she does stay with the problem of finishing her painting for ten years. The psychological conflict behind her drive must accordingly be intense. We expect the breakthrough to be equally powerful when Lily liberates herself from her dependency on Mrs. Ramsay. And so it is. In solving her painting, Lily's self worth and inner strength are enlarged; she rejects Tansly's proscriptions; feels no need to marry, thus emancipating herself from the expectations of her time (and the explicit expectations of the idealized Mrs. Ramsay, too); is able to set limits on Mr. Ramsay, refusing to indulge "his immense self–pity, his demand for sympathy" (152). She is ultimately able to judge him less harshly than she did in the opening "Window" section of the novel.

The psychic breakthrough portrayed is doubled: Woolf has *both* Lily and Mr. Ramsay overcome their dependency on Mrs. Ramsay, just as the author stopped obsessing about her mother once she completed *To The Lighthouse* (see above p7). The father is now a part of the boatful of Ramsays sailing to their long–promised destination of the lighthouse. His children's attitudes toward him have softened, and his to theirs. He has overcome his status of being apart from others because of his intellectual detachment. We feel his sad neediness in the "Time Passes" section when he stumbles in a dark passage and reaches out for his wife: "his arms, though stretch out, remained empty" (128).

Both survivors required ten grieving years to work through their attachments to the dead Mrs. Ramsay. "You'll find us much changed," Mr. Ramsay tells Lilly (148). At the novel's end the anxiety of ambivalence has transformed into an understanding that anything can be seen in different ways. Points of view are malleable. As James says, "No, the other was also the lighthouse. Nothing was simply one thing" (186).

Brains excel at finding patterns but also err by seeing patterns where none exist [15]. We resist the idea that life is arbitrary and make up reasons for random events such as Rachel Vinrace's senseless death. Ambiguity and senseless acts in Woolf's fiction allow her to translate on the page the meaningless complexity of affect and perception that burdened her own mind. By doing so she worked through it. In her diary she wrote, "I am sure that this is the right way of using [images]––not in set pieces as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images; never making them work out" [qtd. in 16]. Spoon–feeding readers with what events meant did not interest her. Refusing to simplify life's complexities helped her and her readers see the sane and insane Virginia Woolf side by side, polar opposites that constituted the whole person.

However ill Woolf was, an astonishingly instinct for wholeness burned within her. The image of splinters runs throughout her writing. At the age of 16 (three years after she

was first labeled “mad”), Woolf already sensed her mental fragmentation, but also sensed the possibility of restoring “some kind of whole made of shimmering fragments” [17].

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