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## INTRODUCTION

I was first introduced to Virginia Woolf in a British Literature survey class my sophomore year. Both entertained and challenged by her writing, I knew I enjoyed studying her even if I did not understand everything she wrote the first time I read it. When I studied abroad in London the next fall, I took a research class on biography which focused on the connection between person and place in London, and quickly realized what could be gained from studying Woolf while living in Bloomsbury.

As a student studying Woolf in America, I found her interesting, but only related to her as a pupil of her work. In London, though, I became her neighbor, her audience, her admirer. I lived one street over from her 46 Gordon Square home, and could actually picture her writing *To the Lighthouse* as she moseyed around Tavistock Square, a garden I passed by daily. I began to picture glimpses of the life she lived, and became more interested in her biography. Moreover, as someone who has had to navigate both mental and physical illnesses, I became protective and sympathetic towards her. Critics, psychologists, and biographers often speak authoritatively about the causes of her mental illness and the amount of control she had over them, and I soon became angry when I felt that scholars and biographers spoke of her in a way that to me did not accurately represent her reality.

Numerous claims have been made about her personality, writing, and illnesses, and there exists seemingly unending evidence to sort through relating to her life. These factors make Woolf a difficult subject to study. Woolf's biographer that I discuss in this project, Hermione

Lee, explains: “You would have to be an idiot to take on board writing the life of Virginia Woolf or Edith Wharton without any apprehension” (Thomas). There are weighty implications that come with studying Woolf in regards to how we view her as a woman and as a writer, and many of these implications are not flattering towards her. When her mental illnesses are portrayed as legitimate, they are often used to victimize her, and can make her seem weak or crazed or unstable as a person. At times, she *was* unstable because of her mental illness, but I felt there had to be a way to discuss the realities of her abuse and illnesses without patronizing her or discounting her abilities as a writer.

In my mind, I saw Woolf as brave and courageous. I saw her suicide not as a moment of giving up, but rather an instance (albeit a permanent one) where she decided she was finished with her turbulent mind and body after almost five decades of symptoms and breakdowns. I knew being angry about her victimization gave me a starting point for my research, but also that I had to be as objective as possible when studying her and others’ portrayals of her. When researching Woolf both in London and now at UNC, I sought to find evidence depicting the different facets of Woolf’s personality, even if it caused me to alter my view of her. I wanted to seek the reality of her circumstances and how she responded to them. Like others, I wanted to know if she was a victim of sexual abuse as a child and what her mental illnesses were like. Were they legitimate? Or a device she simply used to increase her fame? I wondered if both of these things could be true, and if they were, how I could best reconcile this information.

Furthermore, I realized that a holistic view of Woolf might be undiscoverable because there is no way of knowing whether the presentations we have of her are fully representative. Much of them come to us from the firsthand account of her letters and diaries, and is not objective. Additionally, I realize I am studying her one hundred years after she lived. The

knowledge in psychiatry, women's rights, and social norms are much different now than in her time, and I have to be careful when considering her actions and circumstances through my twenty-first century lenses. In addition to wanting to understand the nature of Woolf's illnesses and her reactions to them, I wanted to examine the way the different views of her are perpetrated. Specifically, how critical, psychological, and biographical approaches view her mental illnesses as they relate to her literature and her personality as a writer. I wanted to research what each approach allows or limits as it thinks about these things.

This project is valuable because it considers three out of the many diverse voices on Woolf. Like other researchers, I have to decide which analysis of her I view as most accurate. In presenting the values and limitations to these three approaches to studying her, I am contributing to the broader understanding of Virginia Woolf. What follows are chapters discussing the critical, biographical, and psychiatric lenses of viewing Woolf, approaches that were chosen because they consider how her mental illness and literature relate to each other. I critique and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses that come with each lens. With the critical approach, I examine the characteristics of headnotes: how the genre gives context to the reader about both the writer's biography and literary accomplishments, but ultimately, how the *Norton* headnotes speaks towards Woolf in a more reductive way than it uses when discussing male writers with similar histories. Using the *Norton* headnote as an example of literary criticism on Woolf does not mean that it is representative of all literary criticism about her. Rather, headnotes exist almost as their own subgenre and can provide an example of how her biography and literature are paired together. With the biographical approach, I consider the way Woolf's personality and history are presented holistically by Lee, but also how her failure to draw definite conclusions leaves readers wanting more. In the psychiatric approach, I consider how Dr. Thomas Szasz argues that

Woolf's symptoms were used to manipulate those around her. Ultimately, however, I discuss how he refuses to consider all of the evidence available when making these claims about Woolf.

When researching Woolf, the contexts and social movements that led to each interpretation must be considered. Lee explains the following in her biography on Woolf:

Virginia Woolf's story is reformulated by each generation. She takes on the shape of difficult modernist preoccupied with questions of form, or comedian of manners, or neurotic highbrow aesthete, or inventive fantasist, or pernicious snob, or Marxist feminist, or historian of women's lives, or victim of abuse, or lesbian heroine, or cultural analyst, depending on who is reading her, and when, and in what context (758).

It is important that I also acknowledge the social context which surrounds me as I study Woolf. For example, the feminist movements of today are going to influence how I view her. As a female student in the twenty-first century, I am surrounded by rapid societal changes and arguments which outline the possibilities for women today to have three identities: that of wives, mothers, and professionals. This was certainly not the case in Woolf's time, nor was it for many of the scholars who have written on her. My notions of these multi-faceted capabilities that women have are very much a product of my time, and something that adults as young as my parents were not exposed to in the same way that I am. Additionally, there are current movements related to public perceptions about mental illness and the field of psychology that shaped how I feel about these aspects of Woolf's biography. Destigmatizing mental illness, meditation and mindfulness, and self-care are all concepts discussed in the public today. When I view Woolf's symptoms, I am inevitably going to do so through the lens of psychology and mental wellness that we have now. It is easy to look at her symptoms and relate them to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* to discover what her diagnoses would have been, but many of the criteria for these disorders have been identified only very recently. As I approach Woolf and the evidence regarding her, I acknowledge the influence that is going

to come from my background which supports the capabilities of women and the legitimacy of mental illness.

When talking about Woolf in this project, I often refer to her as Virginia, and I am aware of how this practice is thought to diminish the status of women writers in a field dominated by men. As Hermione Lee discusses in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, there is a trend to refer to women writers by their first name. She explains:

... because biographies of women have for so long been more protective and intimate than those of great men, a biography of a famous English woman novelist might still refer throughout to Jane or Charlotte, while famous male English novelists are not usually called Charles or Anthony (129).

It is the intimacy mentioned above which makes me think of Woolf as being Virginia at times instead of always simply Woolf. The way Virginia explains her thoughts in her letters and diaries makes her readers feel as if they know her personally. Lee understands this characteristic of Woolf's personality. In Woolf's biography, Lee admits that readers will be tempted to call her Virginia. She writes: "All readers of Virginia Woolf's diaries.... will feel an extraordinary sense of intimacy with the voice that is talking there. They will want to call her Virginia, and speak proprietorially about her life" (4). Despite the fact that not calling her by her last name (as we would male writers) could delegitimize her status as a scholar, the way I have researched her both as a person and a writer in this project has led me to view her as both "Virginia" and as "Woolf." I want to be clear that I call her by her first name out of a place of intimacy that comes from her own voice in her personal writings, not out of disrespect for her or nonchalance at the way calling female writers can diminish their status as scholars.

In regards to citations, when Szasz and Lee referenced other sources in their books, I have worked with and cited those sources directly if I had access to them. If the sources were unavailable to me, I have simply cited the page number and footnote from their texts.

Additionally, for in-text citations of Woolf's letters and diaries, I have labeled them by volume, such as *LI* or *DI* and given the page number of the entry. Complete citations of the volumes containing her letters and diaries exist in the works cited page.

A year and a half ago, as I sat on the front steps of her 46 Gordon Square home my last week in London, I began to feel as if I had met my own Virginia Woolf. She was creative, entertaining, and resilient, despite facing complex challenges in her life. She refused to submit to the academic and societal limitations of her sex, and was a successful writer despite dealing with severe mental and physical illnesses for the majority of her life. In reading her letters and diaries, I felt like a trusted friend of hers. I will never meet Virginia, but I have loved getting to know her voice and the intimacy she embodied when she wrote. She is certainly imperfect and had many faults, but Virginia Woolf is someone I admire and whom I want to be spoken of in ways that are not reductive and are accurately reflective of her reality. In this project, I have been able to research the different approaches to viewing her, discovering the allowances and limitations that come with the critical, biographical, and psychiatric lenses through which Woolf can be examined.

## CHAPTER 1: THE CRITICAL APPROACH IN THE *NORTON ANTHOLOGY*

**Background:** The critical approach to studying Virginia Woolf can be examined through the *Norton Anthology* headnote. When students interact with a headnote in the *Norton Anthology*, they receive a very brief insight into the biography and critical work of an individual. In many ways, this setup is beneficial for students. It gives them a glimpse into the life of a writer first without being bogged down by publication dates and literary significance. In my personal experience, once students have a glimpse of who the writer was and what they experienced as an individual, we are more motivated to pay attention to the writer's other accomplishments.

Only having a few pages to present this information, the *Norton* editors must be very selective in what they include and how they structure the headnote. As a result, they usually present the biographical information first and then move on to the more critical dimension. Unfortunately, the genre of the headnote is going to have inherent flaws because of this setup. Vincent B. Leitch, an English professor and editor for the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, explains it this way: “By design, anthology and textbook headnotes package and contain information like a memo, valuing control, speed, organization, clarity—values preeminent in today's hurried, market-oriented societies” (176). He admits that there are limitations that arise from these goals (176). Because of these constraints, I believe there exists a great responsibility when the editors of the *Norton* choose the information they include and the tone they take when describing an author. For many students, the headnote in anthologies is the only source of biographical and literary context they receive when studying a writer. Written by



assumedly objective scholars, headnotes are set up to be accepted by students as trustworthy. More often than not, professors do not significantly challenge the information presented by them, or require the student to interact with additional sources. It is these qualities which make the headnote a good avenue through which to study the critical approach to understanding Virginia Woolf: they are trusted and widely used by universities. Because of this, it is imperative that anthology headnotes are truthful and accurate in their representation of writers.

When looking at the headnote on Virginia Woolf, we can see how the limitations of the genre, paired with the tone taken by the editors, can lead to an author being severely misrepresented. In its two pages, the headnote on Woolf conveys a lot of information about her life and work, but does not represent her holistically, and sometimes does so inaccurately. For example, the only lines that reference her work or intellect in the first half of the headnote mention that she educated herself in Leslie's library and that writing "and the intellectual life thus came naturally to her" (2143). I realize it is common to save the literary work for the latter half of a headnote, but this language makes her accomplishments seem as if they happened without effort or because she was lucky, and takes out any skill or personal development that Virginia pursued. This use of "naturally," then, suggests that Virginia was simply lucky to be a good writer, instead of highlighting the ways in which she worked to rise above her gender limitations to become one. The tone it takes during this quick reference to her intellect is reducing, and sets up the tone for the rest of the headnote to be reductive as well. Below, I present the most problematic aspects of Virginia Woolf's headnote, before discussing how the piece relates to other headnotes written in the same anthology, and why this further makes hers problematic. The anthology I discuss in this chapter is the ninth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, volumes D and F.

**The headnote victimizes Woolf immediately.** The fourth sentence of the headnote details all of Virginia's adolescent "suffering." The editors want us to be aware of the trials that plagued her. We read:

... her youth was shadowed by suffering: her older half-brother sexually abused her; her mother died in 1895, precipitating the first of her mental breakdowns; a beloved half-sister died in childbirth two years later; her father died of cancer in 1904; and a brother died of typhoid in 1906 (2143).

In the first paragraph of her headnote, we have four traumatic deaths and the abuse mentioned, which causes the reader to view her as a victim, a sufferer, and someone to be pitied. Later in the headnote when discussing her work, readers learn that she began to write criticism for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1905, the year after her father's death (2144). The first paragraph, then, paints the time surrounding her death as traumatic, but later her literary accomplishments during that time are discussed. Because this accomplishment is left out of the first section, the writing at the onset of the headnote diminishes her professional successes while highlighting only the negatively emotional events of her adolescence, and sets the audience up to view her with pity when reading her headnote instead of someone who is resilient.

**The headnote also presents false information.** In the above section, the *Norton* mentioned that her half sister Stella died in childbirth. She was pregnant at the time of her death, but never went into labor, however, and therefore could not have died in childbirth. She was diagnosed with peritonitis, an inflammation of part of the intestines, but it was also speculated that she had appendicitis, an inverted uterus, or an injury from rough sex, none of which sent her into labor (Lee 137). Knowing the cause of Stella's death is not needed to understand Woolf as a writer, but misreporting information at all has very severe consequences. Because many college courses use the *Norton* as a definitive authority when teaching literature, the information there must be accurate, no matter how small that information is. Leitch agrees with this, and says

inadequate headnotes contain “insufficient, incorrect, or excessive information” (176). Similar to calling Virginia bisexual (as is discussed below), announcing that Stella died in childbirth is far too simple and simply not true. She was pregnant when she died, and it was an unexpected death, but she did not die in childbirth. This victimizing, “damsel in distress” mentality, then, is not only projected onto Virginia, but onto her sister as well. The cause of Stella’s death here is insignificant to the greater understanding of Woolf and the effects of Stella’s death on her, but if the *Norton* is going to include how she died it needs to do so accurately.

**It reduces her sexually.** In regards to her complicated sexuality, the *Norton* claims that “Woolf... was bisexual; and thirteen years after her marriage to the journalist and essayist Leonard Woolf, she fell passionately in love with the poet Vita [Victoria] Sackville-West” (2143). This is not technically untrue, but it also is not fully accurate either. There was a lot of speculation about whether or not Virginia Woolf was a lesbian, who she slept with, or if she slept with anyone, and her sexuality is too complex to be labeled simply as bisexuality. She had a husband, and she had those whom she loved. Much of the evidence, though, is unclear regarding what kind of sex, if any, she had with others.

Most believe she never even slept with Leonard. Gerald Brenan, a fellow writer, claims that Leonard told him that when they tried to consummate their marriage on their honeymoon, Virginia “had got into such a violent state of excitement that he had to stop,” because this state looked like the same kind of excitement she had before her “madness” episodes. Brenan said that Leonard gave “up all idea of ever having any sort of sexual satisfaction” with his wife (Lee 326, footnote 68). Moreover, there were times when Virginia was “critical and ill-at-ease” around homosexual women (Lee 484). She proposed that “These Sapphists *love* women; friendship is never untinged with amorosity” (*D3*, 51). Using the word “these” suggests two groups—Virginia

and those she is writing about. She does not say “we Sapphists.” We cannot know for certain if she was a lesbian, but in this moment, she was taking on the role of not being homosexual. We know that there were “kisses and pettings and intimate conversations” between her and Vita, but does this make her a lesbian (Lee 484)? It may be possible that she participated in homosexual acts and was not a homosexual.

Additionally, we know that she loved other women before Vita. The way the *Norton* presents her romantic life makes it sound like she married Leonard, realized over a decade later that she fancied women, and then left him to have an affair with Vita. In reality, her sexuality was complicated long before their marriage. Virginia was playful, trusting, and erotic with Violet Dickinson, and Lee argues that Violet gave her a place where she could behave “freely, childishly” (Lee 165). Their relationship was erotic, but it was not exclusively one of lovers, and its existence makes the *Norton*’s claim that she fell passionately in love with a lesbian after being married for so long not fully representative of her sexuality.

Moreover, the editors treat it differently than the way they treat her “androgynous in mind” interests that she put forth in her writing. On the last line of the headnote, they mention how she wanted to speak to both men and women through her literature, explaining that “she proposed literature that would be ‘androgynous in mind’ and resonate equally with men and women (2144). If the editors could understand the androgyny that she presented in her writing, could they not have understood and represented her complex sexuality any more accurately than simply calling her bisexual? The *Norton* editors could have given students a more holistic view of her sexuality if they related it to her interest in androgyny as displayed in her fiction.

**It reduces her personality, and excludes many facets of it.** We read in the *Norton* that behind “Woolf’s liveliness and wit... lay psychological tensions created partly by her childhood

wounds and partly by her perfectionism, she being her own most exacting critic” (2143). Woolf had lasting effects from the trauma she experienced as an adolescent, but her personality contained many more facets and qualities than those arising from her childhood wounds and perfectionism. I understand that the style of the headnote does not give room for a detailed analysis of her personality—the *Norton* editors only used two pages to communicate her biography and literary accomplishments instead of the eight hundred pages Hermione Lee uses in her depiction of Virginia Woolf. Despite this, however, there are many more beneficial ways of looking at Woolf’s personality than what is represented in the anthology. Reducing the tensions of her complex identity to fifty percent wounded and fifty percent self-deprecating is far too limiting, and I wish the *Norton* editors had been less condescending or complacent when choosing how they wanted to describe her.

**It also reduces and incorrectly labels her mental illness.** When discussing Woolf’s mental illness specifically, the headnote argues the following:

... she had been subject to periods of severe depression, particularly after finishing a book. In March 1941 she drowned herself in a river, an act influenced by her dread of World War II... and her fear that she was about to lose her mind and become a burden on her husband, who had supported her emotionally and intellectually (2143).

In presenting her mental illness this tersely, the *Norton* editors are telescoping in on an issue that was much bigger and more complicated than what is represented here. Their formula seems to read that her usual sadness after finishing a novel plus the threat of World War II plus feeling burdensome equaled her suicide attempt. While some of this is true—the war severely exacerbated her symptoms, for example, her suicide was not only a culmination of these factors, and we fail to even get the full consequences of these situations for her in the headnote. For example, not included is the fact that she and Leonard had to leave London after their previous two homes were bombed, and that he had a suicide plan in place for them if the Nazis ever

invaded England (Lee 717-718). Having as little room to introduce these moments as a headnote does makes biographing her difficult, but it does not represent her accurately to act like she alone succumbed to the pressures of the war by committing suicide when Leonard was contemplating the same thing, and when both her previous Gordon Square home and their current Tavistock residence had been hit by the bombings (Lee 730).

Something else not mentioned in the headnote is the fact that her mental state was troublesome for the majority of Virginia's life (not just when she was writing) and that she tried to commit suicide other times as well (as early as 1904), not only in 1941 (Lee 175, 195). Today, Virginia would almost certainly be diagnosed with bipolar disorder (Lee 172). She exhibited states of depression but also states of euphoria, along with many other physical illnesses, none of which are represented in her headnote. To present her mental illness in the way her death is told makes it sound too much like a temporary struggle for her than it actually was. The headnote also does not allude to the resiliency she had as a scholar. Despite years of challenges with her mental and physical illnesses, Virginia stayed a prolific writer.

I realize presenting all of this information is not realistic in a headnote because of space limitations, but the editors could have communicated something more holistic and fully representative about her in the space allotted. An alternative sentence explaining her suicide could be: "Woolf was a prolific and talented writer for most of her life, despite being cared for by her husband because of many physical and mental illnesses. She committed suicide in 1941, partly due to the incoming threat of World War II and the bombings of their homes." This formulation is almost identical to the information presented in the headnote, but it takes a more neutral tone when relaying her cause of death. It is the perspective and tone, not the amount of detail given, which makes the *Norton* headnote problematic in how it represents Virginia.

**When we compare Woolf's headnote to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's or John Keats's, we see two distinct tones emerge.** It would be helpful to know which of the *Norton* editors wrote each headnote to see if different authors wrote Woolf's, Coleridge's, and Keats's, but the anthologies do not include this information. Leitch, cited above, explains that headnotes for the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* pass through at least four hands before publication (173). If this was the case with the *Norton Anthology of British Literature*, none of the authors who worked on Woolf's saw her portrayal as unfair or inaccurate, which is severely problematic. Below, I compare and contrast how her headnote relates to male authors who have similar histories as Woolf's.

Coleridge also experienced the death of his father at a young age, and was subsequently sent to school in London where he became "a dreamy, enthusiastic, and extraordinarily precocious schoolboy" (437). We also read that his friend and essayist Charles Lamb wrote on their time at school together, and depicted Coleridge's "loneliness, his learning, and his eloquence" (437). Based on the research I have done on Virginia, it is safe to say that she too experienced loneliness, learning, and eloquence in her adolescence. Both children dealt with loss, and Coleridge's isolation is mentioned, but the overall perspective we get of him is a charming, passionate child despite these challenges. With Virginia, we are only clued into the hardship she experienced, and not any of the ways she was able to rise above the death of her loved ones when she was a young girl.

When speaking of Coleridge's final years and death, the headnote memorializes him and is less critical than it is with Virginia. In the last years of his life, Coleridge moved in with his physician and his physician's wife, and these years "were quieter and happier than any he had known since the turn of the century" (438). Virginia needed the support of her husband too

because of her illnesses, but the *Norton* says that Leonard supported her “emotionally and intellectually” because their press printed her novels (2143). This critical and reducing tone distracts from her literary accomplishments and seems to imply that her works only existed because of Leonard’s help. This is very different from the way Coleridge is described, even though he received support in the later years of his life by moving in with his doctor. Their deaths are presented very differently as well. “When he died,” we read, “Coleridge left his friends with the sense that an incomparable intellect had vanished from the world” (439). I argue that this too could be said about Virginia, but it is not said about her. Despite the similarities they experienced when their fathers died, their dependence on others, and the loss to the literary world that came with their deaths, Coleridge is honored and memorialized while the tone describing Virginia is critical and dismissive.

If we position Woolf’s biography next to Keats’s, other close comparisons can be made. Like Virginia, Keats was also known to be very sensitive to criticism, something the *Norton* mentions. We read that “this rising genius, already frail and sensitive, was mortally crushed by vicious reviews” (902). While it is reassuring to see a male writer portrayed honestly, albeit unflatteringly in his headnote, the *Norton* is still honoring him while describing his sensitivity. Before we read the words “frail and sensitive” we are assured that he was a budding genius. When presenting negative aspects of his personality, the *Norton* first qualifies them, crediting his intellect before describing his insecurities, a courtesy Virginia does not receive.

Keats also experienced familial loss, and it is illuminating to compare the *Norton*’s depiction of his brother’s illness with those of Virginia’s relatives. We read that his “brother Tom contracted tuberculosis, and the poet, in devoted attendance, helplessly watched him waste away until his death that December” (902). The words helplessly might paint Keats as a victim in



a similar way that Woolf's headnote insinuates, but by saying that he was "in devoted attendance," he is still being honored. This portrays him as his brother's constant bedside companion in a very positive light, instead of the victimization Virginia receives. Lastly, Keats too is memorialized in his death in a way that Virginia is not. His headnote argues that "No one can read Keats's poems and letters without sensing the tragic waste of an extraordinary intellect and genius cut off so early" (903). Keats only wrote until he was twenty-four, much younger than Virginia, and died of a disease instead of suicide (903). These factors might lead to his death being considered more tragic than Virginia's, who ended her life at her own hands and died much older than Keats. Even if we consider this, however, the tones describing the writers' deaths are strikingly different. Keats is honored like Coleridge, while Virginia is criticized for the factors leading to her death, and is certainly not memorialized in the way the two male writers are.

**Despite the praise it gives for her writing, Woolf's headnote is ultimately condescending towards her.** Does this mean the headnote is totally deplorable in its overall portrayal of Virginia, then? I do not think so. When it discusses her writing, it does so respectfully and gives credit to her literary accomplishments. My fear, however, is that the limitations of the genre and tone taken by the editors of the headnote on Virginia will influence readers to view Woolf in a certain light before they get to her literary significance. The headnotes on Keats and Coleridge are longer and intermix biography with discussions of their literature more than Woolf's does, and they present their faults, traumas, and weaknesses in a much more positive light. Female writers during these times were not given the same intellectual experiences as their male counterparts, so the content of the headnotes will only be similar to a certain extent, but it is telling that there are discernable differences in the tones used to describe

Woolf versus Coleridge and Keats. The *Norton* sets students up to view Woolf in a patronizing and reductive way, whereas the headnotes of the male writers highlight their achievements despite trials with a tone that is not used when speaking of Virginia Woolf.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH IN HERMIONE LEE'S *VIRGINIA WOOLF*

**Background:** Hermione Lee is a celebrated biographer, professor, and critic. She graduated from the University of Oxford in 1968, and is now the president of Oxford's Wolfson College ([hermionelee.com](http://hermionelee.com)). For the last forty-five years, she has taught in America and the United Kingdom, and was appointed a Commander of the British Empire ([hermionelee.com](http://hermionelee.com)). Her biography on Virginia Woolf was published in the United States in 1997 and has won numerous awards, including the *New York Times Book Review* Best Book of the Year ([nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)). She writes openly about the "rules" that must be followed when writing biographies, guidelines she published in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* in 2009. One quality of biography that she feels is important is a balance between passion and objectivity. She argues that "... biographies written without involvement, just as a money-making job or duty, may fall flat. There must be some involvement, but there must also be detachment" (13). This is certainly one of Lee's best qualities in her presentation of Woolf. In *Virginia Woolf*, she displays a clear interest in her subject material, but keeps a sense of objectivity when making conclusions.

Lee wrote *Virginia Woolf* at the request of two separate publishers. When reflecting on this timing, she explains that she "thought, Clearly, people feel it's the right time to have a new biography of Virginia Woolf, and clearly, more than one person thinks I should be the one to do it" (Thomas). In regards to her audience, the biography will certainly attract scholars who are interested in understanding the multiple selves of Woolf, for the biography is long, extensive, and requires a working knowledge of both her life and literature when interacting with it. Despite

this, non-academic individuals who are interested in Woolf could benefit from Lee's biography as well. The way the book is divided up thematically instead of chronologically helps readers interact with the parts of Woolf's story they are interested in learning about, without getting overwhelmed with all the facets of Woolf's life.

Lee's biography on Woolf was received with tremendous praise. Barbara Hardy in the *Boston Review* praises Lee for the way she admits the limitations that will come with a biographical analysis of Woolf. She writes that "Lee's questioning story knows biography can't be definitive.... The apologetic note [Lee's postscript to the biography] is characteristic of a biographer telling life-mysteries while admitting the cultural constraints of her genre" (Hardy). The *New York Times* celebrates her refusal to make definitive claims when the evidence is unclear, calling Lee's suggestive but honest analysis of the abuse Woolf suffered "reductionist speculation" (Merkin). I believe this description very accurately reflects Lee's work and is a quality that is necessary when writing a biography with seemingly contradictory evidence. *Publishers Weekly* champions the way she unites her life and literature, "assessing life and work as a seamless whole," something else that is important when studying Virginia Woolf ("Virginia Woolf").

Most importantly, Lee is praised for refusing to speak of Woolf as someone to be pitied.

*Publishers Weekly* agrees, and congratulates Lee in this way:

... Lee helps vanquish the stereotype of Virginia Woolf as a half-mad bohemian writer who destroyed herself as the bombs of WWII exploded over England. The ultimately vulnerable Woolf has found a thorough and sympathetic biographer who refuses to exploit either her literary talent or her devastating mental illness ("Virginia Woolf").

The *New York Times* further argues the following: "Although it may seem odd to say of someone who killed herself... that she was heroic, it is all the same the word that one most associates with Woolf after reading Ms. Lee's biography" (Merkin). Woolf, often criticized for "succumbing" to

her madness, is successfully painted as brave by Hermione Lee. This tone drew me to Lee's presentation of Woolf in the first place. She speaks of Virginia's life with clarity, thoroughness, and transparency, and does so without pitying or patronizing Woolf. Because of this, her biography is the best approach I have found when discussing Woolf's biography as it relates to her literature.

Although comparing her biography and literature seems intuitive when analyzing Woolf, as I have researched her writing, I have found that many critics do not relate them. When linking the two, however, Lee refuses to label Woolf or simply impose her literature on her writing and vice versa, and this further strengthens her position as a researcher in my mind. She situates the biography and literature side by side, but does not place labels on Virginia or draw too tightly of conclusions. Below, I outline the helpful moves Lee makes when biographing Woolf, before examining the limitations that come with her approach and the genre of biography.

When others heard that she was writing on Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee admits that they usually asked her the same four questions over and over again: "Is it true that she was sexually abused as a child? What was her madness and why did she kill herself? Was Leonard a good or a wicked husband? Wasn't she the most terrible snob?" (3). Lee explains that "It began to seem that everyone who reads books has an opinion of some kind about Virginia Woolf..." (3). So it was not only fans or critics of Woolf who had opinions of her, but everyone, Lee explains. Virginia Woolf was a literary genius; she had abnormal mental and physical health and a non-traditional sex history. Fame opens up the doors for opinions and questions from others, and in Lee's experience, many people had already formed opinions about Woolf before investigating all the facts. For example, they asked Lee: "*Wasn't* she the most terrible snob?" instead of "*Was* she the most terrible snob?" This question is damning more than it is inquisitive.

Even those who might not have had opinions formed of her yet had questions, and they often wanted black or white answers. “Was she abused? Was Leonard good or wicked? Wasn’t she a snob?” With Woolf, however, answers are almost never clear, and at times the evidence that can be given when trying to answer these questions leads to conclusions that seem gray, rather than black or white.

When Lee describes Woolf in her biography, she is careful to present a holistic view of who Virginia was. When addressing sensitive issues such as Woolf’s mental illness or sexual abuse, she gives her audience a very clear picture of the reality of these issues for Virginia. One minor way she does this is through the thematic chaptering of her biography. Instead of organizing her book on Virginia’s life chronologically, she collects and presents her research in chapters dedicated to specific themes or areas of Woolf’s life. Particularly relevant to this project are chapters on Woolf’s mental health history titled *Madness*, and the evidence of her adolescent emotional trauma and sexual abuse labeled *Abuses*. In discussing Woolf’s biography in this focused way, she is able to point her audience directly to the material relating to Woolf’s mental illness and sexual history without it being scattered across Virginia’s entire life story. The way Lee presents her research in this straightforward and blatant manner illustrates her commitment to clarity when speaking about Woolf’s life, but is not the only move she makes in an attempt to represent Virginia fairly.

There are several other things that Lee does which helps her audience understand what evidence exists that supports (or does not support) the claims that Woolf was mentally ill and sexually abused as a child. These practices of Lee’s help demonstrate how areas of Woolf’s literature relate to areas of her biography. These moves are often deliberate decisions of Lee’s, which she makes as a biographer when trying to make sense of Virginia Woolf’s life. These

decisions are also ones that she explains to her readers at various times in the biography.

There is a specific ordering to my argument of why Lee's presentation of Virginia is particularly helpful for those who want to understand her multifaceted personality, mental illness, and literature. I first present the most important qualities of her biography when analyzing Woolf. Next, I expound on some of the fears she has and confessions she makes when completing this project, and explain why this mindset makes Lee trustworthy as a researcher. Lee admits the inherent limitations that come with studying Woolf, and being honest about these when presenting research is important. Lastly, I discuss a few other aspects which help make this piece on Woolf as helpful in understanding her as it is. I include these smaller qualities of the biography in addition to the major moves and confessions she makes because they further represent the care and diligence Lee embodies when portraying Woolf. The major qualities discussed would be enough to classify her as the best window into Woolf's mental health history and sexual experiences as they relate to her literature, but the confessions and these smaller moves are important too. They help us further understand Woolf as accurately as possible and help validate why Lee's careful, holistic approach to Virginia is so compelling.

**Most importantly, Lee compares Woolf's literature as it relates to Virginia's life experiences.** When writing on the effects of Woolf's mother's death on Virginia, for example, Lee mentions letters and memoir entries where Virginia recalls not having many emotions in regards to her passing. In her biography, Lee writes that "She would often describe the death, each time a little differently, but usually reverting to its most distressing aspect: that she could not feel anything" (129). Lee quotes letters Virginia wrote as evidence which admits that this happened in her personal life too. In these letters, she wrote that she could not remember what happened after the death and that she "was afraid I was not feeling enough" (*D1*, 85, *D4*, 242).

Woolf may have had suppressed memories, but her emotions during this time as she recalls them were not poignant, which bothers her. Yet another time, Woolf recalls telling herself “I feel nothing whatever” as those around her carried on crying at her mother’s death (*Moments of Being*, 92). She may have felt emotion and wanted to suppress it, therefore telling herself “you feel nothing,” but when Woolf thinks of her mother’s death it is done with a remembrance and guilt that she did not feel enough. Her emotions at the time were not poignant or memorable, and this bothers her.

When presenting this information, Lee brings in a moment from Woolf’s literature for comparison which also does not indulge in emotion at the death of a mother. In *To the Lighthouse*, we see a moment which paints a picture of this for us. Woolf wrote: “[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]” (140). These short lines that introduce the mother’s passing also show a suppression or absence of feelings from the author and Lee writes that this almost non-existent mentioning of the death after her previous indulgence into Mrs. Ramsay’s inner thoughts is “abrupt” and “shocking” (127). The sentence attempts to discuss Mrs. Ramsay’s death, but abruptly changes the subject without finishing the thought. In her biography, Lee points her audience to this moment in Woolf’s literature to help us understand how Woolf personally reacted to the death of her own mother.

**Secondly, Lee refuses to categorize Virginia.** Lee reminds her audience that Virginia (and Leonard) cannot be categorized. She presents evidence that shows how Leonard could be an oppressive “guardian.” He drew up a contract for Virginia in the summer of 1914 which outlined exactly what he thought her behavior should be during treatment, for example, including



specifications for when and how she was to rest, how much milk she was to drink, where she was to have her breakfast, and the exact time she was to be in bed and go to sleep. He had Virginia sign this document to show her agreement to what it outlined (331). Although the contract was written in jest, it shows the power dynamic of the couple, and the type of relationship they had—one where a document like this could be viewed as a joke. When discussing their marriage, Lee argues that we cannot look at these behaviors (among other negative ones) and determine that Leonard was only an oppressive husband. She argues that it “would be a mistake, fatal to the understanding of the Woolf marriage, to read Leonard Woolf simply as a cold, obstructive disciplinarian” (334). Even when looking at evidence which makes him appear to be one, Lee urges that he should not be considered only in this way.

In discussing Virginia as well, Lee is careful to flesh out her complicated identities. When talking about Woolf’s sexual history and her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, she mentions that Virginia hated labels. She writes that even though Woolf was physically intimate with Vita through “kisses and pettings,” Virginia “did not define herself as a Sapphist” (484). Lee argues that “She could not bear to categorize herself as belonging to a group defined by its sexual behaviour (just as she didn’t want to think of herself as an ordinary ‘wife,’ or as a writer of ‘novels’)” (484). Knowing that Virginia hated the assumptions that came with these terms, we can guess that she tried to avoid behavior which would have placed herself in them. Lee understands this and refuses to label Leonard or Virginia with binary qualities. In the way she approached Leonard as Woolf’s husband and Virginia’s complicated sexuality, Lee is giving us evidence that she at least tried to avoid labeling them.

**Lee refuses to impose Virginia’s life with her literature.** She reminds us that while it is important to relate the two, we cannot simply impose Woolf’s literature onto her life. In

discussing Virginia's sexual history, she mentions the fiction that includes relationships resembling those from Virginia's life, but warns that too much cannot be read into them. "Simplified readings of Vita 'as' Orlando or of Mrs. Dalloway's bisexual and virginal marriage as a straightforward representation of Virginia Woolf's own life won't do," she warns (485). She asserts that they can only be situated side by side and not imposed on each other. Fiction is not the same as a letter or a diary, and even a memoir from Woolf is not fully reliable as a fully accurate interpretation of her personality. Any portrayal of Virginia, written by herself, is going to contain Woolf as she wanted to be seen. Because of this, Lee gives her audience both Woolf's biographical accounts and her literary presentations of abnormal sex history and mental health, but is careful not to make overly tight connections between the two or read too much into her fiction, even if doing so would be very convenient for her as a biographer when making claims about Woolf's life and personality.

**Lee warns her audience that she may not be intelligent enough to understand Woolf correctly.** She writes the following on the first page of her biography:

There are many times, writing this, when I have been afraid of Virginia Woolf. I think I would have been afraid of meeting her. I am afraid of not being intelligent enough for her. Reading and writing her life, I am often afraid (or, in one of the words she used most about her mental states, "apprehensive") *for* her (3).

Lee is sympathetic and cautious about the implications that result when a scholar tries to analyze Woolf. In the first fear mentioned above, she is aware that Virginia is not a simple person to study, and her intelligence makes her intimidating for Lee to write about. If Lee is indeed not intelligent enough for Virginia, and if Lee cannot properly understand the meaning behind what Virginia was writing, then Woolf will be misrepresented in her biography. Lee is considered a reputable and experienced biographer, but her fears could be legitimate. Even if her intentions are to research and analyze Woolf as wholly representative as possible, she could misinterpret

her simply because she is not smart enough to understand Woolf's mind. I trust Lee as a biographer more because of this confession, which is honest in the fact that she may have intellectual limitations when studying Woolf.

**Lee warns how easy it is to victimize Woolf.** By saying that she is apprehensive *for* Virginia, Lee is further admitting that doing a biography on Woolf at all is risky because of the labels and opinions that can so easily get attached to her. Many writers have tried to view Woolf through specific lenses and interpretations, and yet, in asking Lee to write this biography of Woolf, publishers still felt that a sufficient analysis had not been produced. Lee is warning us that it is easy to focus on Woolf as a victim as the result of her mental illness and sexual abuse. Virginia's life was filled with triumphs and successes, but also hardship and difficulty. Most of her life was plagued with mental illness and relationships which contained extreme abuses of power. She finally took her own life at the age of fifty-nine after multiple suicide attempts. Writing her biography made Lee scared for her and worried that she could not tell Woolf's story without victimizing her. Because she feels that "Biography has so much to do with blame," Lee wants to push back against pointing fingers at actors in the subject's life when writing her biographies (Thomas).

We might be tempted to view Woolf as a victim because of what happened to her, but we cannot stay in this line of thinking. There is evidence in the way that Virginia handled her experiences which proves that she should not be seen as a victim, such as the amount of writing she produced despite her illness. Lee helps us do this by reminding us to remember Woolf's accomplishments despite her hardships even "in a year broken by illness" (4). In one of her most turbulent years health-wise, Virginia "would finish revising and publish one novel and a collection of essays, write eight or so short stories, start work on another novel, publish thirty-

seven review articles” in addition to the books she read and diary and letters she wrote (4). In giving us this list of works that Virginia completed, Lee is reminding us that we cannot view Virginia’s struggles without considering the successes she achieved despite facing these hardships.

**Lee warns that intimacy cannot equal authority for the reader.** Lee warns that readers must be careful when viewing the inner life of Woolf, reminding her audience of the danger that can come from making assumptions based on Woolf’s trusting voice. Readers cannot feel like they understand Woolf’s personality thoroughly simply because they hear her inner thoughts in her letters and diaries. Lee argues that the readers of Woolf’s diaries “will feel an extraordinary sense of intimacy with the voice that is talking there. They will want to call her Virginia, and speak proprietorially about her life” (4). I have been faced with this temptation myself when studying Woolf. Part of the attraction of researching her is the level of closeness that can be felt when working with her letters and diaries. For example, when writing about her outrage at the treatments she was subjected to, she explained: “I have never spent such a wretched 8 months in my life... really a doctor is worse than a husband!” (*LI*, 147-148). These candid thoughts about Leonard, among other unfiltered confessions, make the reader feel as if they are a friend and confidant of Woolf.

Feeling this way is not necessarily a bad thing. Readers must be careful in their approach to Woolf and be sure not to speak facts over her life without proper evidence, though. Because Woolf is as talented and convincing as she is, it is tempting to view everything she writes as accurate. Being able to feel intimate with her daily life may help readers approach her literature from a biographical standpoint, which is important. Lee is right, however, to warn that when studying her and her introspective personal writing, readers can become authoritative on a life

that is not their own, and make Woolf out to be someone she is not. Her writing was, in part, the product of the image that she wanted to create, and those who study her cannot speak authoritatively over her life simply because her tone is easy to trust.

**Lee introduces Woolf's self-professed duplicity and the implications that come with Woolf's multiple "selves."** Lee is honest about the self-professed duplicity Virginia possessed. Lee references Virginia's confession that there was "the fictitious V.W. whom I carry like a mask about the world" in addition to Woolf's secret self (*D5*, 307). By mentioning her apprehension in studying Woolf, and referencing Woolf's "secret self" and "mask," Lee is letting us in on the care she is taking when writing about Woolf. Through her letters and diaries we get a very intimate view of Virginia, but she wanted this done on her own terms and often avoided the limelight. Once, she hid from a *New York Times* reporter who came to interview her at her home. He wandered into their garden and she ducked her head below the window, hiding out of his view, and refused to speak with him (*D5*, 72-73). In *Moments of Being*, she explains how unfitting she would feel if she had a memoir. "My memoirs, which are always private, and at their best only about proposals of marriage, seductions by half-brothers, and encounters with Ottoline and so on, must soon run dry" (182). This confession is meant to be humorous, but also shows that she felt that her life, albeit mundane, was still too private for a memoir. Her fiction might have been put on display for the public eye, but at times, she desired her inner thoughts to stay hers, and feared exposing herself (Lee 17-18). Because she presented herself in several spheres, we may never be able to fully know which self (or selves) that she put forth represented Virginia most accurately.

**Lee addresses the limits of her own interpretation.** As mentioned in the introduction, Lee brings up many different lenses through which Woolf has been viewed. In doing so, she is

admitting that the biography she has written reflects her own current position and is honest that certain factors have influenced her work. In an interview about writing the biography on Woolf, she explains that “you write the book that your nature inclines you toward. You write the book that your education, your temperament, your training, your class, your race, your gender, your nationality incline you toward” (Thomas). Lee is both a scholar and a wife. She writes women’s lives primarily (Thomas). Additionally, she wrote Woolf’s biography during the third-wave feminist movement, and these things, along with her personality, culture, and educational background are going to cause her to see Woolf through a specific viewpoint. Addressing this makes her argument stronger. By introducing this limitation of her own approach, she is communicating that other positions or viewpoints could be equally as legitimate as hers. Lee knows that she is not the only informed voice on Woolf’s life, even if she is a carefully crafted and illuminative one.

**Lee is not afraid to introduce contradictions in her analysis of Woolf.** When there are contradictions (no matter how small) to what she argues, Lee makes sure that her audience is aware of them. This first minor move she makes when biographing Woolf adds legitimacy to her arguments. When discussing whether or not Virginia was sexually abused as a child, she insinuates how careful she feels she must be when making conclusions. She writes of a time when Virginia explained that she felt like “an unfortunate minnow shut up in the same tank with an unwieldy and turbulent whale” when she was with George (*Moments of Being*, 147). Lee wonders if she explains it like this because George was an easy target for satire, or if this image alludes to actions “too horrifying to speak of without defensive laughter” (Lee 148-149). “Whichever is true,” she writes, “the tone leaves room for ambiguity, and the evidence has to be approached with care” (149).

There are other examples Lee gives us that might cause us to question whether or not the abuse really happened. For example, Woolf cut out the passage of a memory written for the Memoir Club which said that George “dreamt and desired with great natural lust; but as for giving either to himself or to others an account of his desires that was out of the question” (Lee 152, footnote 51). The fact that this contradictory piece of evidence was written and crossed out by Virginia is suspicious. It might be that Virginia wanted to act as if nothing happened to her, but decided that she could not lie. Lee mentions, though, that what she wrote might have been the truth and simply less dramatic than the other accounts, and therefore was cut out in order to keep her story consistent (153). Also, Lee mentions the fact that Virginia does not reflect on the abuse in her diary when reminiscing on their relationship right after George’s death, which we might expect her to think more on at his passing (155). When there is contradicting evidence, Lee presents it for her audience, even if it causes making definitive claims about whether or not the abuse occurred more difficult for her.

Despite this care, Lee gives a lot of evidence that supports the claim that Woolf was sexually abused. In a letter written to Vanessa, Virginia describes the time she told Janet Case the true nature of George’s relations with her. “When I got to the bedroom scenes, she dropped her lace, and gasped like a benevolent gudgeon,” Virginia wrote (*LI*, 472). This is not the only outsider she told about the abuse, however. Ottoline Morrell recounts a conversation she had with Virginia in which Virginia said George used to fondle her in her bedroom at night (155, footnote 66). While Woolf could be blatantly lying, these accounts (among others) make it seem like she was sexually abused. Lee is careful to give evidence that exists which seems to both support and contradict the abuse, even though this complicates things when trying to discern whether or not the abuse actually occurred.

**Lee respects Woolf's psychological reality.** In addition to presenting all the evidence about the abuse, Lee is not afraid to remain in a gray area instead of forcing a definite analysis on Woolf. Instead, she considers Woolf's psychological reality when discussing the effects of the abuse on her. She writes:

The evidence is strong enough, and yet ambiguous enough, to open the way for conflicting psychobiographical interpretations which draw quite different shapes of Virginia Woolf's interior life. But what matters most in the story is what Virginia Woolf made out of what happened (156).

Lee further argues that “to an extent, her life was what she *thought* her life was” and that “Virginia Woolf herself thought that what had been done to her was very damaging” (156). Even if we cannot know for certain whether or not she was abused, her life was lived with the belief or assumption that she was, Lee argues, and this is what she wants her audience to focus on. I have experienced this before as a child. As a young elementary-aged student, I was criticized by my peers and family for being too bossy. Looking back, their criticism was both warranted and said for my ultimate benefit, but it has caused me to question whether or not I should speak up when working in group settings ever since. This example did not have the same ramifications for me that Woolf's perceived abuse had on her, but the principle is similar. Our minds are delicate, and oftentimes we can make the pain of the situation out to be larger than it “should be.” This does not make the pain any less real, though. When investigating the sexual abuse, Lee argues that if we consider the pain Woolf felt in her psychological reality regardless of the confusing evidence, we will be able to understand Woolf best.

**Lee offers guidance for her readers when the evidence is unclear.** Lee's approach should not only be recognized for giving us a helpful takeaway for thinking about Virginia's abuse, but the fact that she gives a takeaway at all should be emphasized. Lee does not leave her readers stranded in the middle of these conflicting views without any guidance, but she also does



not shove her opinion (albeit a knowledgeable one) down our throat. This is a value she discusses in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. She argues that “All biographers have at times to suppose and infer. If their research is good and their sense of the subject is strong, then their guesses will be worth listening to” (138). Guessing is exactly what she does with Virginia, and making inferences about the sexual abuse from Woolf’s psychological reality makes Lee a good biographer.

**Lee’s methodology and perspective of Woolf is the best of the three I consider here, but ultimately does not draw tight enough conclusions.** Because of the care she takes in biographing Virginia Woolf, Lee might seem to be the perfect writer on her. She certainly is the best. At the structural level of her chaptering, she presents the evidence of Woolf’s abuses and illnesses clearly. In conducting a project of this scale, she presents several limitations and warnings for those who encounter Virginia through her biography and discusses her honest feelings towards studying Woolf. Most importantly, she pairs Woolf’s biography and literature together without drawing too tight of conclusions for the audience. She refuses to describe Leonard or Virginia in terms that are labeling or reductive. She makes sure to consider all of the evidence available when describing their behavior, which usually leads to her being unable to make generalizations about them. She refrains from imposing Woolf’s literature on her life. She is capable of looking at the larger picture of Woolf’s abuse, offering contradictory evidence and ultimately caring most for the tangible effects that can be seen in Virginia. She offers guidance to her readers about the abuse that she feels is safe. Does this make Lee the perfect voice on Woolf? Sadly, no.

It is her strengths that give rise to her limitations. She is restrained in not speaking authoritatively over Woolf’s life, but this leaves her audience wanting more. She does not see an

issue with this and believes that biographers “may allow gaps and puzzles into the narrative, or try to smooth these over” (*Biography* 124). I wish she left fewer gaps than she does, however. Like she did with the sexual abuse, I wish that Lee left readers with more “educated guesses” about what the multifaceted aspects of Virginia Woolf’s personality, reality, and meanings in her literature were.

A time she could do this is when speaking on the death of Virginia’s mother. She mentions Mrs. Ramsay’s death in *To The Lighthouse* quoted above, but does not fully expound on what the literature could mean. More could be said about the choice of punctuation Virginia uses, yet Lee does not discuss it other than saying “...the abrupt parenthesis is shocking” (127). I am aware that she is a biographer and not a literary critic, but she has the best approach when trying to make meaning of Woolf’s life. Could Lee not offer any more guidance on Virginia’s literature or make some semi-definite conclusions in her biography? We need someone to talk about the abrupt parentheses further, and Lee simply does not. Lee gives holistic and comprehensive views of Woolf’s life in her biography, but she does not draw enough speculative conclusions to me and often refuses to comment on the meaning in Woolf’s literature. This makes it hard for her readers to walk away feeling like they have a good understanding of the different layers of Woolf and how her literature relates to her biography.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE PSYCHIATRIC APPROACH IN DR. THOMAS SZASZ'S "*MY MADNESS SAVED ME*"

**Background:** Dr. Thomas Szasz was an influential, albeit controversial, figure in the field of psychiatry. Often called an antipsychiatrist (an identity he denies), he was critical of many of the practices and ideologies in psychology and psychiatry (Carey, Schaler). He was trained in psychoanalysis, but wanted to push back against Freud's ideas and legacy by seeking to make psychiatry more medically sound and empirically focused (Carey). After his death in 2012, one of his protégées published a website in his honor; this website includes a manifesto that those curious about his work are encouraged to read (Schaler). The first point of this manifesto explains his primary argument: that mental illness itself is a myth. Szasz's theory explains that "Classifying thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as diseases is a logical and semantic error" ("Summary Statement"). This is an error because it uses medical terminology to classify human behaviors, not physical and medical conditions.

Mental illnesses, then, are metaphors, more like the term "love" than the term "leukemia" ("*My Madness*" 2, 9). These labels can insinuate an abstract idea of someone who is "ill," but this "illness" is not the same as a physical illness with physical symptoms. Physical symptoms can be diagnosed with tests, but there are no tests or perceivable physical markers in those who have a mental illness ("*My Madness*" 6). Using bipolar disorder as an example, Szasz explains that "There are no objective medical tests for so-called bipolar illness and pathologists have not found lesions pathognomonic of this alleged disease" ("*My Madness*" 6). Because these conditions do not arise from medical testing, they are inventions to Szasz. Doctors treat and

diagnose diseases, but psychiatrists “construct and deconstruct diseases, such as schizophrenia and homosexuality” (“*My Madness*” 6). Szasz believes these metaphors are created by psychiatrists to explain the actions of an individual, but are constructs of human ideas, not the result of perceivable physical markers.

Szasz further argues that these human constructs are ascribed to individuals by society in response to their actions, and these individuals can either accept or reject society’s constructs. Mental illnesses, then, produce roles into “which a person is cast by his family and society, which he then assumes and plays, or against which he rebels and from which he tries to escape” (“*My Madness*” 3-4). Szasz argues that people diagnosed with mental illnesses, then, are simply suffering from “mental patienthood” (“*My Madness*” 3-4). The legitimacy of these conditions, however, lies only in the fact that society recognizes them as mental “illnesses.” Many psychiatrists are unwilling to support his view that mental illnesses do not exist, but his discourse on the societal implications of those who become diagnosed with mental illnesses is often celebrated, even by those who disagree with other parts of his theory (Carey).

“*My Madness Saved Me*” is Szasz’s literary criticism and psychobiography of Virginia Woolf. Szasz did not frequently write about individual lives or authors, and sympathizers with his views praise him for applying his theory about mental illness and its implications to a specific person as an example of his beliefs (Wynne 271). Szasz’s self-professed purpose in writing the book is to outline how Leonard and Virginia Woolf used the labels of mental illness and the notions of psychiatry for their personal gain (“*My Madness*” 13). Moreover, he argues that this was done not only in their lives as individuals, but that they intentionally used mental illness and the practice of psychiatry to influence qualities of their marriage and the lives of each other as well. He admits that there were some limitations to Virginia’s degree of personal agency, like the

society she lived in, for example, but that ultimately, she was “an active, goal-directed, moral agent, responsible equally for her ‘creativity’ and her ‘craziness’” (“*My Madness*” 13). He wants to present Virginia as a willing actor and perpetrator of her symptoms of mental illness.

It is unclear who Szasz is writing to. Some of the reviews of the text consider the implications it will have for psychiatrists who are interested in “learning the truth about Virginia Woolf” (Halpern 42). Dr. Francis Biley, however, discusses the implications this text will have on the general public (472). I think Szasz would consider his audience to be both psychiatrists and common readers. Certainly he wanted to dissuade psychologists who believe and encourage the idea that mental illness exists, but he also writes to Woolf fans and the general public when trying to persuade others of his beliefs.

Szasz is an important voice to add to this conversation about Virginia Woolf because he can represent a psychiatric viewpoint of Woolf’s life and literature. I have already examined examples of how headnote writers and biographers view Virginia, but as a figure whose life was severely influenced by the ideas of psychology, it is helpful to add this third voice. Additionally, Szasz can present the view of someone who is more skeptical about the nature and reality of Virginia’s illness. Although most agree that her symptoms classify as bipolar disorder now, there are facets of her medical and mental health history which are unclear or controversial. By looking at a medical professional who is less convinced by the legitimacy of her illness, we may be able to more clearly illuminate the truth regarding her symptoms, instead of simply accepting the common opinion of what they equated to.

Although they are mostly written by Szasz supporters, reviews of “*My Madness Saved Me*” praise it. The support shown for this work further adds to the significance in examining it—other psychiatrists come to the same conclusion about Woolf as Szasz does. Halpern, for

example, argues that “A tremendous gap in the literary world has existed for 65 years” (Halpern 42). This statement is said about the speculation concerning whether or not Virginia was mad. He also praises Szasz’s “meticulous research” (Halpern 42). Biley confesses to be an old friend of Szasz, but agrees in the quality of his research presented, arguing that it should be a core text for those in careers of psychiatry and mental health nursing (468). She celebrates how he pairs Virginia’s life and literature and his presentation of Woolf’s “complex interpersonal” marriage with Leonard (471-472).

Mark Hussey, however, feels differently about Szasz’s work. He admits that at first he was not sure he even wanted to comment on the book because of how absurd it seems, but writes that he was afraid to let Szasz’s opinions remain unchallenged. He agrees that Szasz’s radical beliefs criticizing the mental illness industry deserve to be praised, but argues that the way he presents them in *“My Madness Saved Me”* is impermissible (208). He questions the sources Szasz used (which includes gradesaver.com, as he points out) and criticizes the publisher for being too trusting of Szasz’s reputation to check the research before sending the book to print (209). He quickly dismisses the work as “gibberish” and “worth no one’s time,” but I believe something can be gained from Szasz’s text, despite these issues (209). We could dismiss the conclusions of Szasz’s arguments because of the illegitimacy of his evidence (and I argue that we should) but examining his methodology is helpful for this project. In trying to investigate how psychologists view Virginia Woolf, a lot can be gained from looking at what methods he uses when trying to paint a picture of her. Like Lee, Szasz links Woolf’s life with her literature and considers the effects that Virginia’s childhood traumas had on her. Inevitably, there exists some limitations to this viewpoint, which I discuss after presenting his ideas and methodology when studying Virginia Woolf.

**Leonard and Virginia both perpetrated and were victimized by manipulation of each other in their marriage.** Unless otherwise stated, from this point forward, the views I present are Szasz's arguments regarding Virginia Woolf in "*My Madness Saved Me*," and do not necessarily reflect my own view. In regards to Virginia Woolf specifically, Szasz argues that she did not suffer from mental illness or insanity. Rather, she used her personality and life experiences to her advantage to manipulate those around her. He argues the following:

Virginia Woolf was a victim of neither mental illness, nor psychiatry, nor her husband—three ways she is regularly portrayed. Instead, she was an intelligent and self-assertive person, a moral agent who used mental illness, psychiatry, and her husband to fashion for herself a life of her own choosing (13).

This idea of agency is key for Szasz when arguing how we should view Woolf. As a moral agent, Virginia Woolf was an actor in her own life and not a victim. He asserts that Woolf was a manipulator who used the mental illness metaphor to fashion for herself the life she wanted, one in which she could be seen as both a celebrated writer and needy patient. While Szasz gives evidence showing how Woolf was controlled by her husband and doctors at times, his primary argument is that she was able to turn her mental illness into a personal triumph, and used the labels her doctors and husband gave her to create the life she wanted. Below, I present how Szasz argues she and Leonard were co-manipulators, and how he feels she further used this labeling to manipulate those around her.

He argues that Leonard "married up" societally with marrying Virginia, securing his spot into a higher realm of social elite and perhaps one of the most influential English intellectual circles of the time (20). Furthermore, marrying her gave Leonard a role in their marriage; he "knew that Virginia was 'sick' and 'needed help' – *his* help," Szasz argues (21). This role of caretaker allowed him to control different aspects of their marriage, like their decision not to have children. Virginia wanted them, but Leonard did not. Leonard got his own way by not

fathering any kids. He did this by insisting that she was not healthy enough to have them, and getting others to agree with him in this. For example, he needed doctors who would also state she was too ill and “went mad-doctor shopping, looking for a physician who would agree with him that he had married a madwoman, unfit for motherhood” (23). This was not the only way he manipulated her, or exerted power over his wife, however. Szasz also discusses the forced feedings that Leonard put Virginia through at the recommendation of her doctors. Szasz argues that “No sooner did they marry than he assumed the role of stuffing Virginia. When she had a breakdown in 1913, his campaign to fatten her went into high gear” (33). He argues that this type of forced feeding was a replacement for sex for Leonard; instead of penetrating her vagina he simply penetrated her mouth with food (33). These feedings, Szasz argues, “replaced the vaginal-sexual penetration of coitus with the oral-alimentary penetration of feeding” (33). Force-feeding Virginia, then, was another way that Leonard could control his wife, in addition to preventing her from having children.

Virginia in turn used Leonard when marrying him. Virginia did this by taking on the public label of “wife” that marriage gave her, which helped her fulfill her own desires professionally, societally, and medically. She received social approval in marriage. Szasz writes that Virginia “wanted to occupy the social role of a married woman,” like women who want “the MRS. degree” (20). Being married in England at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided her a refuge from the judgement and insecurities of being an older single woman in the early modern period, and Szasz specifically argues that Virginia wanted to embody the social obligations that being a wife gave her. Furthermore, the benefits she received from this union were ones she received without ever having to fully be his wife sexually. This happened because she “treated conjugal intercourse as if it were rape” (21). To Szasz, this aversion to sex was more broad than



just physical intercourse, however. He argues that Woolf shut Leonard “out of her life—genitally, verbally, spiritually...” because she wanted to protect herself from being “known” (20-21). In doing so, she took on the label of marriage without participating in the activities involved with it, manipulating Leonard in their relationship.

Once she began to embody the role of a madwoman, Szasz argues that this label stayed consistent throughout her entire lifetime. “Irrevocably typecast as a madwoman,” Szasz argues, “she played that role for the rest of her life, and beyond the grave” (26). This certainly included their marriage. An example of this is her suicide attempt when she ingested the veronal pills. Szasz presents it this way: “Her breakdown was her decision, a retaliation against Leonard for taking her to see Head [a doctor he consulted who agreed that she should not have children], and her recovery was her decision... She turned her madness on and off the same way for the rest of her life” (25-26). Virginia instigated mental breakdowns when she was angry at Leonard for things like not allowing her to have children or force-feeding her. These breakdowns gave her time away from Leonard because they got her sent to an asylum or out of London, Szasz argues. When she became bored from being excluded from life, she pretended she had recovered and was reintegrated into society (26). Through this manipulation, she was able to be a wife, but still had an escape route for when she wanted a break from their marriage.

**Virginia used her mental illness to influence the way she was perceived as a writer.**

Szasz does not merely argue that Virginia used the mental illness metaphor in order to manipulate her relationship with Leonard, but that the characteristics of this role came to be essential to parts of her identity as a writer as well. Szasz argues that those around her began talking about Virginia as being “mad” when she had her first mental breakdown after her mother died. He references the Bell biography, which says that “she knew that she had been mad and

might be mad again” (44). Szasz argues that this initial categorization of Virginia was not warranted from her behavior. He argues that she was simply expressing a natural reaction to a traumatic experience, the loss of her mother at age thirteen. Those around her, however, labeled her as mad, and she embodied this label from that point forward. Woolf, he argues “...embraced the role and made playing it an integral part of her life strategy—to her profit as well as her peril” (16). How did she use this strategically? By creating for herself a persona and an identity. Virginia’s madness:

...was her property, her treasure, her identity. She did not merely snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. She transformed defeat by madness-and-psychiatry into the triumph of literary-psychiatric immortality, a model for future poets and writers... (12)

For better or for worse, through the ways she came to be seen as a patient and as “ill,” she defined a new character— “the legendary mad-genius artist” (12). Szasz seems to be insinuating that there exists a mad-genius-writer club, of which Woolf was the founder. Her insanity was a means to aesthetic triumph, and Woolf was the first to demonstrate how to combine the two in order to achieve more fame and success. Other scholars have researched the link between writers and suicide. In the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, Sanderson references Kaye Jamison and A. Alvarez, who argue that “professional writers are at a greater-than-average risk for suicide....” (Sanderson 853). This situation is going to contribute to the perpetuation of the mad-genius-writer mentality. We can see the effects this persona has even now. Today, Woolf is a famously known writer for her mental illnesses and suicide as well as her scholarship.

**Szasz links her literature with her biography when analyzing Virginia Woolf, and this helps the legitimacy of his position as a psychiatrist.** He does this by discussing *Mrs. Dalloway* when explaining Woolf. He postulated that like “all of Virginia Woolf’s books, *Mrs. Dalloway* is autobiographical, the characters wearing little more than fig leaves to cover their

true identity” (41). Specifically, Szasz references *Mrs. Dalloway* to show the contrast of Septimus’ illness and how it relates to Woolf’s. He quotes: “So there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel” (Woolf 89). What was this sin? What did he not feel? Love for his wife Rezia, we discover. Szasz quotes further from the story, in which we read “...how he had married his wife without loving her; had lied to her... The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death” (Woolf 89). In the story, Septimus was suffering from his illness because he married his wife without loving her, and Szasz argues that Virginia too married Leonard without loving him (42). He quotes a letter she wrote to Leonard where she explains her lack of affection for him and his unattractiveness to her. “You seem so foreign... There are moments—when you kissed me the other day was one—When I feel no more than a rock” (*L1*, 496) Woolf married her husband without loving him, and like Septimus, had to pay the consequences. She did this by “acting mad, being mad, and letting herself be humiliated by Leonard and his carefully chosen psychiatrists” (42). It becomes a moral issue for Virginia and Septimus, not a medical one. This lack of morality in lying, then, is what leads to her same “mad” fate as Septimus.

Although not found in Szasz’s book, there is evidence that corroborates this view from Lee’s biography; Virginia does bring morality into view by explaining her belief that her choices had a severe and direct effect on her own symptoms. She writes Leonard a letter from her treatment center which explains, “Its all my fault... I have been very good... I am grateful and repentant” (*L2*, 34-35). When able to reflect in treatment, then, she believed that her actions were both controllable and blame worthy. She brings her own morality into question other times as well in regards to her behavior and symptoms. While Leonard was usually the one insisting Virginia was too ill to raise a child, there were times when Virginia also blamed her own

behavior and lack of capabilities. Had she had “a little more self-control” she reflects, they could have had children (*D3*, 107). Virginia views her behavior as her own fault, something very consistent with Szasz’ analysis of her mental illness as the result of her lack of morality. In linking her biography and literature together by comparing her madness with Septimus’, Szasz is helping his audience see a two-sided view of Virginia, and this methodology is important when trying to analyze Woolf.

Szasz further questions Woolf’s depiction of doctors in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and how this portrayal might relate to her experience with her own doctors. Szasz quotes *Mrs. Dalloway*’s description of Septimus’ doctor: “He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up” (Woolf 99). Biographically, we know that the treatment Virginia received for her mental illness was similar to Septimus’ proposed treatment. She was sent away because of her illness (Lee 180). When it is decided that he will be sent away, like Virginia often was, Septimus commits suicide, realizing that death was the way to get power over his doctors, who wanted him to leave his wife to “rest” (Woolf 143-146). Szasz questions why Virginia allowed herself to be subjected to these things in treatment without rebelling in her personal life if she truly believed doctors were as brutal as depicted in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Interestingly enough, we have accounts from her personal writing where she admits that she knew her doctors were not helpful. “The truth is doctors know absolutely nothing...” Virginia wrote (*L5*, 307). If this was her true view, why did she continue to submit to these doctors? Szasz is interested in comparing her life experiences with mental health, and sees her refusal to push back against her doctors (when Septimus committed suicide to escape them) as a problem.

Virginia discusses her thought process that went into describing the doctors in the story the way she did, and admits that when writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, she wanted Septimus to be

exasperated with his doctors (Lee 188). Again, if her view of doctors was this poor, why did she not rebel against them in real life? Szasz argues that as “a writer, she knew that... psychiatrists were pseudomedical inquisitors and wardens; but as a non-writer—as a wife, sister, citizen—she acted as if she accepted the reality of mental illness” (44). He believes that her account of Septimus’ treatment in *Mrs. Dalloway* proves that she knew about the manipulation and control the field thrust upon its patients, but as a person she went along with their methods in order to keep up with the mental illness façade. He is insinuating that she realized the brutality and futility of doctors, and presented them as she actually felt in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In her real life, he theorizes, she needed the ruse of “mental illness” for her personal goals, so she went along with their practices. In pairing this related literary depiction with moments from her biography, Szasz is able to discuss her motivations in a way he could not have had he only discussed one source or the other.

**Szasz considers the effects of her childhood struggles.** Szasz brings up the supposed sexual abuse and argues what the effects of it might have been on her. As discussed with Lee, I think doing this is very important. Szasz also resolves that despite the discrepancy, we should look at the effects of the abuse, and also her other experiences as a child. He is critical of Virginia and insinuates that she did not handle these challenges well.

Szasz argues that all children are abused in one way or another. The entire essence of childhood, he believes, is to be subjected to abuses which come from imbalances of power and dependence on adults (91). He claims that he writes “not to belittle the significance of Virginia’s traumatic childhood sexual experiences,” but to argue that Woolf’s personality came from a wide variety of factors, and was not determined by the nature of the sexual abuse alone (91). Woolf did have many disadvantages in her life (8). She was raised in an oppressive Victorian society,

suffered traumatic loss when her mother and step-sister both died in her adolescence, was denied opportunities because of her gender, and was (supposedly) sexually abused. He also highlights the advantages she was given. She came from a distinguished and comfortable family and was good looking (8). He acknowledges that her life had positive and negative factors, but he wants to focus on how she responded to them more than the situations themselves.

As an example of this, he zeroes in on a time when she reminisced about her sexual abuse later as an adult. She wrote a letter at age fifty-nine where she explains: “I still shiver with shame at the memory of my half-brother standing me on a ledge, aged about 6 or so, exploring my private parts” (*L6*, 460). This was written a mere two months before her suicide and over fifty years after the sexual abuse occurred. Europe had erupted into war at this point in history and the Nazis had invaded France, yet Virginia was still ruminating about abuse from her childhood (92). He suggests that she focused more on the negative aspects of her life than positive ones, and focused on past wounds instead of more critical current events. Szasz criticizes her because of this tendency. “...Virginia was, as we all are, responsible for how she framed her childhood and lived her life” (92). By focusing on abuse that happened so long ago, Szasz believes that Virginia gave it far more emphasis in her daily life than she should have.

**There exists limitations and counter evidence to what Szasz argues, however.** While I like how he pairs her life with literature when studying Virginia and considers the effects of her childhood trauma, most of the conclusions Szasz makes are based off only a sample of the evidence available, and do not most accurately present the probable reality of Virginia’s life. Below, I provide some counter evidence to his arguments on how he thinks Leonard and Virginia manipulated each other.

In criticizing their illnesses, Szasz ignores the real, measurable, and recorded mental and

physical symptoms that Virginia and Leonard experienced. While Virginia did talk at times as if she believed that morality and agency were related to her mental health, there were many times when she recognized it as something separate from her choices, and Szasz ignores these accounts. Virginia proclaimed: “Never was anyone so tossed up & down by the body as I am, I think” (*D3*, 174). In her depressed states she hardly ate; in another state she talked for days at a time in dissociated words before crashing into a “coma” (Lee 181, 176). She suffered from hallucinations, and explains that she lived feeling as if “anxiety & nothingness surround me with a vacuum” (Lee 130, 181, *D5*, 63). Even if we ignore the mental symptoms she had, there were physical ones she suffered from as well, something which would have fit more in line with Szasz’s definition of a discernable “illness.” For example, Virginia could have fevers for weeks on end and was often diagnosed with the flu (Lee 181). Lee explains that “All through the 1930s the symptoms of fevers, faints, headaches, jumping pulses and insomnia increased to danger points” (Lee 182). It is important to note that her doctors took these issues seriously. They performed mild surgery (a tooth abstraction) in order to help with the fevers (as was common practice during this time) and giving her hormone shots was also discussed (Lee 182). Even if Szasz wanted to disregard her mental symptoms as malingering, fevers and raised pulses cannot be fabricated. It has been noted that some of the medications she was prescribed can induce some manic-type behaviors, so it is difficult to know if her symptoms were the result of treatments for her other illnesses (Lee 180-181). Even if there is a debate about the origin of her mental illness and if she used it to exploit those around her or her identity as a writer, it is clear that Virginia was physically ill, something which Szasz ignores.

It is also interesting to note that Szasz criticized Leonard for using his tremors to manipulate his way out of service in World War I, but fails to acknowledge that these tremors

were a genuine problem his whole life (27). In public situations when his nervousness intensified, they could be quite severe, and he sought help from doctors regarding them in 1902 and 1930, not just during the war (Lee 299). With both Leonard and Virginia, then, Szasz dismisses all their conditions as simply being manipulations even though they both had clear, definitive physiological symptoms as well as the mental ones that Virginia displayed. By discrediting their symptoms, Szasz is ignoring information that led to them being diagnosed with genuine medical illnesses, which would contradict his theory that their illnesses were only about manipulation. This would have made Woolf an actual patient instead of someone merely faking a “patienthood.”

Additionally, we can certainly sympathize with Woolf’s frustrations towards the treatments she was being subjected to. These included forced feedings, sedatives, asylums where she was forbidden from writing, excessive rest, and mandatory sabbaticals outside of the city away from those she loved. It seems plain to us now that many of these treatments would not be effective for Virginia’s mental illness, but their contradictory effects were not known at the time. For example, it does not seem like a good recommendation to take all writing away from a prolific writer who is currently depressed, but this was the common practice. Szasz is critical of her treatments, but it is not their effectiveness he questions. He argues that they were merely a means through which Leonard and Virginia manipulated each other, and through which the doctors manipulated Virginia.

For example, Szasz is critical of the circumstances regarding Woolf’s forced feeding, believing that Leonard fed her with “a manic zeal” because he believed that Virginia was “psychotically anorexic” (33). This is not a fair view of Leonard’s care for her or Virginia’s illness, for it portrays both of them incorrectly. Szasz asserts that “There was nothing irrational



in Virginia's attitude towards food... She was not interested in food and cooking, perhaps was even repelled by eating, much in the same way that she was not interested in sex, or indeed in much of the external world" (33). In this analysis, Szasz casually dismisses Woolf's lack of desire to eat. I would argue that being repelled by food is not a commonly held rational belief, and Szasz hurts his own argument when he claims to his audience that this is not abnormal.

He misrepresents Leonard's motives for force feeding her by explaining that "No sooner did they marry than he assumed the role of stuffing Virginia. When she had a breakdown in 1913, his campaign to fatten her went into high gear" (33). What he fails to mention is the fact that these kinds of feedings were a common treatment from the 1880s to the 1930s, and we know that all of Woolf's doctors recommended them for her (Lee 179). As for timing, we learn that Leonard consulted more doctors in the period right after their marriage (they wed in 1912) than in any other point in their life in a "desperate search for better advice" (Lee 178). The field of modern psychology at this time lacked the legitimacy and interest that came with the introduction of shell shock diagnosed after World War I, and as a result, many of the treatments and opinions available before this time were not well researched or effective for patients. (Lee 178). The forced feedings might have been extreme and unsuccessful, but they were a commonly held psychological treatment during this time and prescribed by her doctors, not simply Leonard trying to violate her through an alternative means.

Szasz ignores the fact that Virginia might have actually been too ill to have children, which gives legitimacy towards Leonard's not wanting her to have them. The power moves Leonard and Virginia make on each other might appear to be manipulative, especially to a modern audience with a much different perspective of marriage and mental illness than those during the late Victorian and early modern era. If we look at their societal norms of marriage, or

put ourselves in Leonard or Virginia's shoes, however, many of their interactions begin to look more innocent. There were certainly greater consequences and less financial stability for unmarried women in Virginia's time. Additionally, if we consider her having children and being unable to care for them, we can better understand some of Leonard's potential fears. What if Virginia did have a baby, but was too mentally ill to care for it? She might have committed suicide or been sent to an asylum again, leaving the baby without a mother. Leonard did everything he could to ensure that she was viewed as too sick to have a child, protecting his own interests in not have them, but this might have been necessary. Additionally, notions about inheritance and evolution affected whether or not people with illnesses had children during this time. George Savage, one of Woolf's doctors, wrote that "an insane patient may have an insane, idiotic, wicked, epileptic, or somnambulistic child" (Lee 184, footnote 52). Ideas such as these may have perpetrated the resistance Leonard had to Woolf wanting to become a mother.

**Ultimately, Szasz's approach does not consider all of the evidence available when making his arguments, which weakens his position.** Ultimately, Szasz is too critical of Woolf and ignores too much of the other evidence available for his arguments to stand. We as an audience have no right to judge Virginia for whether or not she should have still been ruminating on her childhood sexual abuse. She was denied many rights based on her sex in the period that she lived in; and her father was known for being manipulative and controlling of the women who cared for him. Leonard consulted doctors on Virginia's behalf without her even being present; and she was forced to eat large amounts of food when she did not want to. She was denied entry into an academic realm based on her gender even though she was more than intellectually qualified. The Nazis were approaching England and her husband was Jewish. Her world was very different from the one we know today, and I do not know if we have the right to say

whether or not Virginia handled these experiences poorly or ruminated on them too much. I appreciate Szasz looks at her circumstances, and determines that our appraisal of the situation should be based on what Woolf thought it was, but think the conclusions he draws do not represent all the evidence available when looking at her reality and the time period in which she lived in.

## CONCLUSION

In examining these three approaches, the values and limitations that each contain can be observed. They all seek to pair her life with her literature, something that is crucial when trying to understand Woolf. Because of its genre, the *Norton* headnote is able to talk about the critical dimension the most. When discussing her biography, however, this genre victimizes Virginia and presents wrong information. Hermione Lee carefully approaches Woolf's biography, and is honest about the limitations she feels when writing on her. Her viewpoint first and foremost is that of a biographer, which causes her to comment on Virginia's life much more than her literary work, a limitation of the genre of biography. Szasz holds an important and unique view—a psychiatrist who is not afraid to comment on her literature. His arguments about Virginia Woolf, however, do not consider all of the evidence available and therefore do not accurately reflect her reality.

When considering these approaches, I began to question if the type of perspective I was seeking—comparing Virginia's life with her literature—was even possible. Is there a fourth voice that I did not meet? Perhaps. A co-authorship between Lee and a literary critic might achieve this, but would it be feasible or accessible to common readers? Lee's text on Woolf is already over seven hundred pages, and I am fearful for how long a text would be if it concerned itself equally with the literature as it does her biography. If a pairing of Lee's perspective with detailed literary criticism were to exist as the fourth voice, there are certain characteristics it would have to display. First of all, this fourth approach would have to exist in a series, for the

information needed could not be included in a single text. Secondly, the way Lee organizes her text topically is effective; therefore, this method would be best for the series I am proposing as well. Readers could select volumes based on the topics they were interested in, filtering out some of the material less related to their research. Like the *Norton* headnote, it would be best to present the biographical information first. This would draw the readers in and provide a framework for Virginia's background before they interact with her literature. This biographical introduction would need to include Lee's analysis, but also primary sources. To me, looking at Woolf's letters and diaries is the easiest way to understand her personality, which readers of Woolf only interested in literary criticism do not interact with as much. Additionally, I would argue that the letters and entries in their entirety need to be included for greater context. Lee does a great job of going to Woolf's personal writings as evidence for her arguments, but often extrapolates pieces of them that she needs. In studying them myself, I have found something valuable in interacting with her full letters and diary entries instead of short quotes relating to the topic at hand.

Once her biographical and personal writings were introduced, I would call for a discussion of her literature. While it might be impossible to present every work relating to a topic, if each text could present a handful of her full (or almost full) works presenting evidence for different arguments relating to each topic, readers could be provided with the literary material they need. This would also make it easier for those interested in Woolf to filter through her extensive writing. Because of the amount of work that she produced, this series might provide a way for those who get lost in her cannon a sample of the important literature relating to the topics they are interested in.

When discussing her marriage, for example, both the intimacy and independence she felt

with Leonard would need to be addressed. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse* present marriages which feature both of these qualities. Richard and Clarissa Dalloway live separate lives in many ways, but have a mutual respect for each other's space in their system. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are similar, but *To The Lighthouse* highlights the intimacy and affection that can co-exist. These novels (which would need to be presented in their entirety or very close to it), could allow the reader to interact with Woolf's literature discussing marriage after being introduced to her biography and personal writings.

Additionally, experts or other important voices for various volumes should be brought in. Overall, however, I would want Lee and the literary critic to stay consistent between the volumes so that the research values would extend between topics. While each volume of the series that I am proposing could be several hundred pages long, it would be accessible both to common readers and scholars interested in Woolf. Several hundred pages is a research investment, but in one volume readers could get Lee's sympathetic voice, Woolf's entertaining and illuminative one, literary analysis, presentation of several major works relating to the topic, and outside commentary from specialists. A text like this one would have certainly been helpful for me when researching how Virginia Woolf's mental illness related to her literature.

Even with this series I am proposing, the issue of Virginia Woolf's multiple selves would still be unresolved. Can we ever know which self of Woolf was her most natural personality? I do not think we will be able to, but she is still an important and valuable figure to study, and I predict that we will be analyzing her for one hundred years more. Personally, I am aware that there is a lot of material for me to still discover in investigating Woolf's voice and the conversation surrounding her. I began studying her eighteen months ago, but have yet to be bored or disinterested in this pursuit. Although we may never be able to discern what is most

accurately reflective of personality or biography, her influence on the literary world is immeasurable. I know it has been on mine.

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