Virginia Woolf's "Between the Acts" as an Extension of Woolf's Feminist Polemics

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VIRGINIA WOOLF'S BETWEEN THE ACTS
AS AN EXTENSION OF WOOLF’S FEMINIST POLEMICS

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's last novel, Between the Acts, which was published posthumously, contains four subjects that occur in her essays, A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas. The main characters of the novel correspond to the people for whom the argumentative essays were written. These Pointz Hall characters illustrate the blindness of the patriarchal society that Woolf addresses in the feminist polemics, A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas.

Virginia Woolf's theme in the novel, humanity's aggression and violence, can be discerned in a sub-text designed to reiterate the two books of essays. The four subjects that I have chosen to examine reveal that Virginia Woolf's agenda involved the central relationships that structure society. The first subject I explain concerns the neurotic wife who, because of her submissive and subordinate role, fails to develop latent talents of her own, and as a result, finds her life and her relationship with her husband stultifying. The second subject is humanity's enslavement to instinctual and violent behavior, which results in uncivilized, demeaning relationships. The third subject is "procession" and what it implies about the repetitive nature of history: how humanity fails to learn. The fourth subject centers on the literary heritage of England as illustrated in the pageant of Between the Acts and the effect of its performance on the audience.

The satire of Between the Acts focuses on the patriarchal society, its destructive effects on not only individuals, but on the family unit and the larger community as well. The tone of the novel is dark and despairing because of the imminence of World War II. With the war a reality in 1940 and 1941, Woolf saw little hope for humanity's maturation into a more civilized and equitable society.
VIRGINIA WOOLF’S BETWEEN THE ACTS

AS AN EXTENSION OF WOOLF’S FEMINIST POLEMICS
Between the Acts, Virginia Woolf's last and only uncompleted novel, was published in 1941 after she committed suicide, overcome by the despair of her returning mental illness and the development of World War II. Virginia Woolf wrote Between the Acts as she watched Hitler march through Europe, as she grieved for her nephew, Julian Bell, killed in the Spanish Civil War in 1937, and as she and her husband, Leonard, moved permanently from London to Rodmell in Sussex to escape the bombing of the city.

Her arguments against patriarchal systems in A Room of One's Own develop into the more intense and well-researched persuasive essay, Three Guineas. Both possess a similar purpose: to examine society's practices, especially its rules about women and the way they are treated by men and male-constructed institutions. Virginia Woolf asks that women begin to see the disparity between men and women in educational and professional opportunities; she asks women to evaluate the choices they are given by a patriarchal society; she ridicules the male system of competition, awards, and self-aggrandizement in the law courts, the religious institutions, the military, and medicine. Using facts collected in twelve notebooks, she implies that changes in attitudes toward women must develop if the world is to evolve
politically.

The anger obvious in the two essays turns to despair as she shapes what was to be her last novel. *Between the Acts* captures the spirit of a time when Bloomsbury, as well as the rest of the world, appalled by the aggression of the Fascists and preparing for Armageddon, watches helplessly the human civilization that seems bent on self-destruction.

Virginia Woolf depicts an aura of powerlessness in *Between the Acts*, allowing her characters to see little, to perceive less, to speak vacantly, to walk lethargically and purposelessly. Several critics, Sallie Sears and Jane Marcus in particular, notice that the language and the actions of Woolf's characters are weighed down with ennui. In addition, Sandra Shattuck comments that Woolf's purpose is to "induce thought, discussion, and the possibility of social change," to "draw blood from the readers."

Before the 1980s, critics wrote about the novel's comic effects, the animal imagery, the meaning of the pageant in its center, and the innovative stream-of-consciousness structure. In the last ten to twelve years, however, the novel has begun to undergo scrutiny by feminist critics who have noticed in all of Woolf's works themes that underscore her negative attitudes toward patriarchy. These critics, one of whom is Sears, have also noted the themes of violence and the elements of patriarchal authoritarianism in *Between the Acts*, but the novel remains to be carefully analyzed to discover how the
specific ideas in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are remodeled for fiction.

That the novel develops from the two earlier feminist essays is my contention. I intend to show how the main characters in *Between the Acts* represent the audience for whom the feminist polemics were written. Virginia Woolf's Pointz Hall audience, made up of educated men who impose their wills on submissive women, embody the blindness of British society and are satirized by Woolf in *Between the Acts*. The satire is leveled not only at British society, but also at the ineffectiveness of literature, drama, and religion to improve that social order. The satire in *Between the Acts* seeks to indict the patriarchal system, to awaken both male and female readers so they may see themselves in Virginia Woolf's characters.

Woolf achieves a satirical intention through several subjects that focus on female submission and male domination. She manipulates images of submission and domination to illustrate the problem inherent in relationships: inequity. Four subjects that are directly and clearly stated in the argumentative essays are submerged in the fiction; as Woolf manipulates them in *Between the Acts*, she gives the reader clues as to their importance in the work.

The first subject I will examine is the neurotic wife who, in her submission to the system of patriarchy, denies her personhood and becomes not only dysfunctional, but suicidal.
The second concerns biological determinism: the sexual and instinctual dominion that characterizes males. The third is connected in that it concerns the "procession of educated men" who populate the novel and exercise intellectual and social dominion. The fourth subject concerns the pride of British literary history: the library and the pageant of literature, dominated as it has been by men.

One key to understanding Between the Acts lies in noticing these four interdependent subjects and how they are extensions of ideas in A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas. In examining the four subjects and their historical and fictional contexts, one may also come to understand the tone of the essays as well as the novel, and realize how the rising European conflict of World War II, a time of great anxiety for the whole world, would have affected Between the Acts which came after Woolf's war book, Three Guineas.

The characters in the novel are the ones for whom the two essays were written; Isa is the melancholy lady of the house who devotes her time to thinking about suicide, writing poetry surreptitiously, planning meals, sitting by sick beds, fantasizing about the neighbor man who gives her small affirmations of her existence, fighting with her husband about his infidelities, and ineffectually flirting with a homosexual in order to make her husband jealous. Giles is the angry stockbroker, her husband, who rides long distances to work in the city, fails to communicate his feelings for Isa, virtually
ignores his children, rails ineffectually against the war, pursues a woman who massages his ego, and reveals his contempt for the homosexual, Dodge.

The only character in *Between the Acts* who extends care, Lucy, also devotes almost all her energy to organized religion; she is kind, reads voraciously of pre-historic times, extends hospitality to the homosexual, sees in the fish a faith that parallels her own, and believes that in their unconsciousness they are happy. Virginia Woolf seems to say that Lucy parallels the fish in that she, too, is imprisoned unaware. Another interesting woman in the novel, Miss LaTrobe, the lesbian dramatist, tries unsuccessfully to show her audience that they also are fragments, liars, and cheats by creating a pageant that summarizes scenes from British literature: from the Elizabethan, Restoration, Victorian, and modern times in which mirrors are held up for the audience to see itself. Her attempts are not successful; however, that the attempt is made at all is important to the novel’s structure.

The homosexual, Dodge, is uncomfortable with himself, speaks rarely to others, and allows himself to be used by Isa. Manresa, the aggressive siren, is the type of woman who appears to esteem men. However, by catering to men’s needs for adoration, she represents women who remain unconscious of humanity’s potential for equality and emotional maturation. She does not realize what can be achieved if women and men
change the way they relate to each other.

Actually, none of the Pointz Hall characters realize how imperfectly they relate to one another. Their unconsciousness, ennui, and ineffectual groping all fail to lead them toward more honest communications. That the characters speak to each other with little coherence, coding their loneliness, trying to link but failing to understand or to be understood is Woolf’s point; they walk with hesitancy and self-consciousness; they are lethargic; they fondle each other surreptitiously and speak inanities rather than intimacies. Miss LaTrobe comments on their fragmented lives in the skits. Between the acts, Giles, Manresa, Isa and Dodge parallel the short-sightedness, greed, lust, and imperception of the skits’ characters. This message, and how it is delivered, communicates the tone of despair that courses through Between the Acts. All the characters fail to relate honestly with each other; the pageant serves to remind them of this. They possess the same flaws that they observe in the play: greed, lust, acquisitiveness, jealousy, and deceit. Further, the pageant serves to underscore the tone of despair, for it comments not only on all of the characters’ forebears, but it also comments on literature’s inefficacy; literature does not bring about self-knowledge.

That the message of the pageant is misunderstood by the audience further underscores the irony of the novel. Woolf portrays La Trobe’s struggle and divulges her fears; however,
in spite of a feeling of failure, LaTrobe continues to "make up" scenes in her head when the pageant is over and it is time to go home. She is creative despite all the obstacles, human or otherwise, in her way.

In this portrayal of LaTrobe, Woolf seems also to be, on one hand, demonstrating the tremendous creative power and determination of the artist, and on the other, pointing to the seriousness with which an artist takes her work and her product in spite of the limited successes of the work. Woolf’s tone, then, intentionally ironic, notices the artist who indefatigably wrests with the vagaries of the audience, the critics, and the physical exertions of writing, producing, and directing. That the pageant is understood only fleetingly by the audience adds to the humor.

The first subject that I wish to discuss is the suicidal, melancholy woman whose talents are wasted, whose depression Woolf traces to restricted intellectual and emotional development. In A Room of One’s Own Woolf mentions Shakespeare’s fictional sister committing suicide. In this way, Woolf demonstrates the subservient role that women take in society and how they are at the mercy of socially defined gender roles. Woolf says of the sister, "Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them . . . " (49 Room). Like her in Between the Acts, Isa is shamed into hiding what she writes. And Isa, who contemplates suicide all through the novel, represents
women who fail to see the subservience of their roles, and who grope for meaning.

In addition to the fictional sister of Shakespeare, Woolf discusses several other historical women who had potential but undeveloped talent, Lady Winchelsea and Margaret of Newcastle. Lady Winchelsea, born in 1661, was indignant about women's lack of opportunity. Woolf says her anger and bitterness can be traced to society's contempt. Woolf quotes from her poetry: "My lines decried, and my employment thought, / An useless folly or presumptuous fault . . ." (63 Room). Woolf says Lady Winchelsea "suffered terribly from melancholy," which we can explain at least to some extent when we find her telling us how "she was in the grip of it . . ." (63). She "loved wandering in the fields and thinking about unusual things and scorned, so rashly, so unwisely, 'the dull manage of a servile house' . . ." (64 Room).

The Duchess, Margaret of Newcastle, is the next example Woolf gives of wasted talent. Margaret wrote: "Women live like Bats or Owls, labour like Beasts, and die like Worms . . . ." (64 Room). And Woolf says her intelligence "poured itself out, higgledy-piggledy, in torrents of rhyme and prose, poetry and philosophy which stand congealed in quartos and folios that nobody ever reads . . . . Her wits were turned with solitude . . . . No one taught her . . . . At court they jeered at her" (64 - 65 Room). As a result of the ridicule and the resulting illness, she shut herself up and
became distracted. Despairing, Woolf says of Margaret, "What a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind! as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death" (65 Room).

And Woolf also thinks of all the anonymous women who, rocking the children, sing to them in the winter’s night and create the ballads, the folk-songs that have no authors’ names attached. She contends that "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (51 Room). This woman, then, is for Woolf "crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to . . . ." (51 Room).

In Three Guineas Virginia Woolf’s rhetorical tactic, again, is to point out how restricted women’s lives are. Woolf says that women are "not allowed to fight. Nor . . . again are we allowed to be members of the Stock Exchange . . . . The less direct but still effective weapons which our brothers . . . possess in the diplomatic service, in the church, are also denied to us" (12 Three). She says women have no power, that they are puppets. One example cited several times is Antigone who dies at the hand of a dictator, her uncle, Creon, who says to her, "Pass, then, to the world of the dead, and if thou must needs love, love then. While I live, no woman shall rule me" (170 Three). The arrogance and
stubbornness of the ruler, Creon, represent dictatorial male power in the state and in the home.

Also, in *Three Guineas* Arthur’s Education Fund is the symbol of education reserved for the sons; there is no fund for daughters. Woolf says that when men look at their alma mater, they see a table and a bus, an allowance and trips abroad, quadrangles and landscapes, but the educated men’s daughters see petticoats with holes in them, cold legs of mutton, and the boat train starting for abroad while the guard slams the door in their faces (5 *Three*).

The image of the powerless woman that occurs in both *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One’s Own* is made immediate through the fictional characters in *Between the Acts*. Isa represents the frustrated poet, the languishing housewife whose temperament is imaginative and romantic. She shares several similarities with Lady Winchelsea and Margaret Cavendish of *A Room of One’s Own* and with Antigone who commits suicide when she is imprisoned by the dictator, Creon.

Isa is characterized by Woolf as suicidal. Woolf portrays her as a youthful mother whose boredom and ennui on a summer June day in 1939 cause her to make abortive attempts at communicating. She is described as "abortive" by the narrator of the novel because she seems to spend more time in a fantasy land than in reality. Her habit is to make up lines of poetry, speak them to herself while she is ordering lunch (15 *BTA*) or strolling in the garden (181 *BTA*). When she
writes lines of poetry down in a book, she fears, like Shakespeare’s sister, being found out, so she keeps all her poetry in an account book, disguised, so that Giles will not discover it. She is disconnected from herself in the sense that she does not know herself, her talent, her children, or her husband. She does not trust her husband with the thoughts of her mind and soul; she is unable to articulate even the smallest intimacy.

The void in the relationship with her husband accounts for the emotions of self-disparagement she feels; for doesn’t Giles, her husband, consistently ignore her presence, her feelings, and her needs? Their relationship, characterized on one ostensibly typical day, deteriorates as the pageant concludes and as Isa sees his infidelities with Mrs. Manresa.

At the end of the novel Isa accuses Giles of infidelity and as a result of this, they argue. Woolf implies that Giles’ crushingly authoritarian attitude, together with his crass behavior, constitute the barbarism of the patriarchal system. Woolf implies that the act of love-making that follows their argument may create a new life. The irony suggested here is that marital strife and violence, not loving intimacy, may bring a child into the world. Woolf’s implication is that these characters’ relationships need kindness, not dominance. If a new world order is to ever exist in the future, women and men must forge together more than violent relationships. Isa’s emotional, spiritual
isolation is a result of the male dominance that she experiences. Her pain and ennui lead her to despair and to self-hatred, the source of which she fails to understand.

Her poetry reveals her pain and her desire. Woolf shows in Isa the problem of women being held prisoner in the private house, not realizing their talent, not able to derive any satisfaction or self-esteem from accomplishment. The parallels to women in Three Guineas and A Room of One’s Own are clear.

In one of the first scenes of the novel, Isa orders lunch. She fantasizes about the gentleman farmer and says, "'Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care,' she hummed. 'Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent . . .'. The rhyme was 'air' . . . . 'There to lose what binds us here,' she murmured. 'Soles. Filleted. In time for lunch please'" (15 BTA). She decides that the words are not worth writing down. All through the novel she discounts herself, her poetry, and her contribution to her family's life. She loses self-confidence and seeks affirmation from a stranger, Dodge, because she does not receive it from her husband, Giles.

As she wanders among the flowers of the field in another scene, her poetry expresses the emptiness of what she sees and what she is. She thinks about the possibility of being in a world where "all's equal, . . . where hand seeks hand . . . ." (155 BTA). This scene is crucial to the novel and to the
development of the character of Isa, for here she thinks about the burden of life and that she is the donkey, the slave of those who wish to use her. Her reflection on this burden allows her to say that it was laid on her in the cradle, that it was crooned by singing women, and murmured by waves. Even though Isa is not aware of it, she is the voice of women grieving here for the social order that denies justice, that turns lives into servitude, that will not allow the growth of a woman into an esteemed individual and a development of the 'self.'

Isa, in this scene as well as others, is the fictional embodiment of women through the ages. The lines are important: "She had come into the yard where the dogs were chained; . . . 'How am I burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions. This is the burden that the past laid on me, last little donkey in the long caravanserai crossing the desert'" (155 BTA). We note that the word caravanserai is closely aligned with the image of the donkey. The term means an inn and can be linked to the idea of "caravan" or "procession" in Woolf's plan for this novel.

Isa continues with her meditation, saying, "'Kneel down,' said the past. 'Fill your pannier from our tree. Rise up, donkey. Go your way till your heels blister and your hoofs crack. That was the burden,' she mused, 'laid on me in the cradle'" (155 BTA).

Isa subjugates herself to the system and feels great
anger, sublimated, so she is not aware of the anger's existence. Isa never comes into a recognition of the reason for her depression and thoughts of suicide.

Many other scenes in the novel characterize Isa as caught and caged (66, 179 EBA), and imprisoned; of course, Isa does not consciously think about being imprisoned by the social order; she does not have that capacity, but Woolf expects the reader to see through Isa's actions and into the motivations for her ennui, her emptiness, her spiritual and intellectual blindness. Woolf demonstrates the vacuous language, the thoughtless flirting, the anxiety, and the frustration. Isa is caught in the patriarchal web.

Another place where the reader identifies Isa as an unfocused, unfulfilled woman occurs in the library scene. Woolf's points out in both of the feminist essays that libraries do not contain books by women, since women have only recently begun to be educated and accepted into the professions. In A Room of One's Own Woolf says, "And I looked at the bookcase again. There were the biographies: Johnson and Goethe and Carlyle and Sterne and Cowper and Shelley and Voltaire and Browning . . ." (90). This idea is transformed in Between the Acts when Isa goes into the library at Pointz Hall and looks among the books for one to assuage her toothache, a metaphor for the pain her mind and spirit are suffering. She looks over many titles and sees the life of famous adventurers, of a county; she sees books about science.
Finding nothing to interest her, she picks up the newspaper dropped by her father-in-law and reads about an attempted rape by a guard at Whitehall. Interestingly, Whitehall appears in *Three Guineas* as the scene of a battle for women's rights (63 *Three*). In the novel, the setting is transformed into the place where appears

'A horse with a green tail . . . ' which was fantastic. Next, 'The guard at Whitehall . . . ' which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: 'The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face . . . ' (20 BTA).

The point here seems to be the connection between the library shelves (the symbolic absence of women from intellectual pursuit) and the presence of women attacked violently, sexually. Woolf shows that society bars women from an intellectual exchange. The consequence is a violation by that community. Whitehall is significant because it is the seat of British political power, especially foreign colonial power. Choosing the Whitehall setting for the attempted rape may be Woolf's way of underscoring patriarchal dominance.

The second subject I wish to discuss as it evolves from
the essays to the novel concerns the sexual domination of the male and the instinctual urges that drive human behavior. In both *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* the idea appears that man is a product of the savage past, that much of the ritual in society is a result of that past, and that man repeats the same violent rituals again and again because of humanity's enslavement to instinct. Woolf says, "Great bodies of people are never responsible for what they do. They are driven by instincts which are not within their control. They, too, the patriarchs, the professors, had endless difficulties, terrible drawbacks to contend with" (38 *Room*). She says in *Three Guineas* that the ribbons and furs, the velvet and stripes are a result of "the old savage who has killed a bison asking the other old savage to admire his prowess . . . ." (234). She says to fight is a male's instinct (13 *Three*). Quoting Churchill, she points out that "while men are gathering knowledge and power with ever-increasing speed, their virtues and their wisdom have not shown any . . . improvement as the centuries have rolled. The brain of a modern man does not differ . . . from that of the human being who fought and loved here millions of years ago" (133 *Three*). And Woolf laments that "it seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition" (120 *Three*).

Alexander Zwerdling says in *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* that *Between the Acts* reveals that "violence satisfies an instinctual need in human beings that is in permanent
conflict with the rational, civilizing code by which we are forced to live" (295). In the novel, Woolf encodes this theme; in order to see it clearly we must look at the scenes where characters meditate about pre-historic times. One of those characters is Lucy Swithin.

In *Between the Acts* Lucy reads an *The Outline of History* (8 BTA); she spends hours "thinking about rhododendron forests in Piccadilly. . . " (8 BTA). This opening is very important, for it parallels the closing of the novel where Lucy once more reads her book before retiring to bed. Here, Woolf makes implicit a comparison between the family members and the cave dwellers in the last scene of *Between the Acts*. Lucy reads of "mammoths, mastodons, pre-historic birds" (217 BTA). And in the next paragraph, the description of Bart, her brother, allows the reader to see him as part of the pre-historic narrative: "Shadows crept over Bartholomew's . . . great nose. He looked . . . spectral, and his chair monumental . . . . He rose, shook himself, glared at nothing, and stalked from the room . . . ." (118 BTA). And Lucy continues to read: "'Prehistoric man,' she read, 'half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position . . . .'" (218 ETA). The juxtaposition of these two descriptions is comically appropriate as Woolf suggests that Bart and his household are similar to the ancient society that crouched on the headlands and made their homes in the caves.

In the next part of Woolf's narrative, Giles and Isa are
alone in the room where "enmity was bared . . ." (219 BTA). Woolf paints the last scene in terms of the violence of ancient mankind so we can see her main point: that humanity fails to evolve toward more civilized relationships, that our wars are both personal (in the private house) and political (in the world arena): "The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too" (219 BTA). In the following lines, the two lose their shelter and "it was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks" (219 BTA). And harkening back to LaTrobe’s plans for her next drama, where she thinks, "There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; . . . She heard the first words, . . ." (212 BTA), we see the meaning of the last words of the novel: "Then the curtain rose. They spoke" (219 BTA). Here, Woolf says that LaTrobe’s next drama will be a scene of pre-history; Woolf implies that we repeatedly watch that scene in every household where men and women quarrel before they make love, just as Giles and Isa do. Her message concerns our instinctual drives for violence and sexual union, how inextricable they are, and how these twin instinctual urges prohibit humanity’s achievement of a more rational, just, and civilized world.

Zwerdling comments that while Virginia Woolf was writing *Between the Acts*, her "precarious faith [that civilization was steadily improving] seemed bankrupt, and Woolf was beginning to think of history as retrogressive rather than progressive"
Gillian Beer agrees in "Virginia Woolf and Pre-History" when she says, "Much of the strength of the book [Between the Acts] depends upon its turning aside any notion of development as implying improvement" (114). Beer also notices that Woolf's "easy vacillation between the domestic and the monstrous, [causes her to] reach her most unsettling meditation on the meanings of pre-history" (113). The end and the beginning of the novel clearly reveal one of Woolf's strongest held ideas that permeates not only Three Guineas and A Room of One's Own, but also another novel, The Years. In The Years Woolf puts her main characters in a cellar where they philosophize about the future of mankind and whether or not humanity can progress. She closes that novel on an optimistic note with a scene of one taxi taking both a man and a woman off toward an unknown destination. That she closes Between the Acts with a marital argument is central to Woolf's changing world view. The tone of the last scene of the last novel suggests that humanity is doomed because of its own failure to evolve. Instinctual drives defeat individuals because they can neither recognize them, nor control them.

Central also to the coherence of the novel is Giles' violence in the scene where he discovers and kills a snake that has imprudently chosen a toad larger than it can swallow. As the snake struggles to swallow the toad, Giles kills both of them, locked as they are in a struggle that has no end but death. The scene may serve to illustrate the outcome of
another World War; it may demonstrate the marital struggle that Giles and Isa participate in. Perhaps, as Alexander Zwerdling notes, it may "underline the continuity between the animal kingdom and the world of men" (307). Whatever its symbolic meaning, we can see how it is applicable to Woolf's message. She tries again and again to point toward the violence of man's predatory nature and how self-destructive it is, on either a personal or a global setting.

The third subject I wish to examine is one that Woolf employs to satirize patriarchy and the dominion of men in society: the "procession of educated men." Woolf's rhetorical device in the essays is to use this phrase repetitively, underscoring her own anger and the bitterness about disenfranchised women. Virginia Woolf also uses the word "caravan" as a synonym for "procession" in Between the Acts where it takes on an important role. Woolf tries repetitively to demonstrate the idea of procession in the polemics and the two last novels.

In Three Guineas the "procession of educated men" is a phrase that Woolf uses repetitively to ridicule patriarchal power. She often contrasts the "educated men" with their uneducated sisters in Three Guineas to emphasize the folly of the patriarchal system. Each time Woolf refers to the "procession of educated men" here, one hears the subversive intent behind the words and begins to identify the anger inherent in the use of the phrase. The men's sisters, those
who contribute money to "Arthur's Education Fund," do so without protest, but they notice how their lives are affected by the sacrifice exacted by the fund.

Woolf refers to the procession as she sees the men going in and out of Parliament, the stock exchange, the churches, the libraries. She refers to the procession and the futility of the women who view it as she addresses the women readers directly:

> Now we are here to consider the facts; now we must fix our eyes upon the procession — the procession of the sons of educated men. There they go, our brothers who have been educated at public schools and universities, mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practicing medicine, transacting business, making money (60 - 61 Three).

And in the next few sentences she notes that women are "traipsing along at the tail end of the procession . . . . We who have looked so long at the pageant in books, or from a curtained window" (61). The distinction here between the procession and the pageant is that one implies participation and the other implies passivity; the women watch passively as the masculine world struts and performs.

Woolf's example does not encourage women to join the procession; rather, it summons women to several searching
questions about the integrity of the procession, its
destination, and ultimately, its value. She asserts that "the
questions that we have to ask and to answer about that
procession . . . are so important that they many well change
the lives of all men and women for ever" (42 Three). The
questions concern the terms of joining the procession; they
concern the leaders of the procession. Virginia Woolf does
not want women to join the procession that inevitably leads to
violence, to war, to the subjugation of another race. The
world she envisions in Three Guineas and The Years for future
generations is a world of peace, not violence. She writes,

Let us never cease from the thinking -- what is
this civilization in which we find ourselves?
What are these ceremonies and why should we
take part in them? What are these professions
and why should we make money out of them?
Where in short is it leading us, the procession
of the sons of educated men? (43 Three)

The idea of procession tends to underscore all the way through
this work one main theme: that evolutionary social and
spiritual adaptation requires that mankind give up the
patriarchal power that fosters war.

What follows in Three Guineas is Woolf's litany of battles
which women fought for equality. The battle at Whitehall is
one that has already been mentioned.

In A Room of One's Own Woolf states that the procession's
purpose is "the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition which drives them [men] to desire other people's fields and goods perpetually; to make banners and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children's lives" (44). She clearly outlines the choices for women: to join the historical, metaphorical procession or to begin a new revolution that fosters and nurtures creativity and equality not only of the sexes, but of the races as well. She writes,

> We are not here to sing old songs or to fill in missing rhymes. We are here to consider the facts . . . . [T]he professions . . . have a certain undeniable effect upon the professors. They make the people who practice them possessive, jealous, . . . and highly combative . . . (66 Three).

Women, she asserts, will be just as possessive and pugnacious as the men if they join the procession.

Another result of becoming part of the procession is spiritual death. Woolf lists quotations from a lawyer, a judge, a bishop, a politician, and a doctor who claim not to have the leisure to enjoy life because of the demands of their professions. Her conclusion is that joining this repetitive, competitive struggle is deadening for the soul and that it has no spiritual, moral, or intellectual value (69 Three). Her vision of the cave and the savagery of life without art,
without thought, without music and speech and the sense of proportion is contained in the following sentence from Three Guineas: "Sight goes . . . only a cripple in a cave [remains]" (72).

Interestingly, the image of a caveman and woman is one that reverts back to The Years and projects forward in Woolf's creation of Between the Acts. In this last novel are allusions to the pre-historic past, images of cave women and men, the swamp, the forest, the primeval setting. The presence of this image in Woolf's works reveals how forcefully Woolf tries to communicate humanity's plight. The closing of Between the Acts attests to Woolf's pessimism, as she sees not an improvement, as she had hoped for in The Years; rather, she desolately predicts the deterioration of civilization at the end of her last novel.

In Between the Acts the procession takes several forms; it is the "procession of educated men" that hearkens back to Three Guineas. It is, as well, the procession of literature throughout history that we see in the form of a pageant. Also, it is the caravan in the desert that Isa refers to when she says she is burdened. This becomes the image that appears in the skits as well as the intermissions.

As the first scene in the pageant opens, one sees England, a young girl, speaking a prologue while the Chaucerian pilgrims walk behind her, singing that they " . . . wore ruts in the grass . . . built the house in the lane . . ."
Queen Eliza comes next "and the pilgrims who had continued their march and their chant in the background, now gathered round the figure of Eliza on her soap box as if to form an audience at a play." As Eliza concludes, the dance stopped, and "a procession formed. Great Eliza descended her soapbox" (94). The interesting juxtaposition here is the use of an adjective, great, that mocks the queen. The noun, soapbox, brings the grandiose picture into perspective. Woolf implies that the exalted topic is deflated by language that reminds us we are seeing a skit -- and a comedy. The use of the procession here to allow for entrances and exits is reminiscent of the processions in Three Guineas and A Room of One's Own only in that there is an allusion to form, to pomp, to the pretensions of acting and actors that serve to remind the audience of its own pretensions.

At the end of the first interval, Giles, the unhappy stockbroker, heads a procession back to the pageant with Mrs. Manresa. The emphasis in this scene is on the attitudes of the characters in the procession; like their counterparts in the pageant, they appear grandiose. Manresa and Giles epitomize the kind of people for whom the pageant was written: the self-assured, affluent, lustful, and manipulative. Giles is the son of an educated man whose life is empty of meaning and depth, while Manresa represents the predatory women who trade equality for adoring, lustful glances from men who are hungry for attention. In the novel, Woolf attempts to show us
through the language of satire that these two characters are not admirable. The procession Giles and Manresa lead indicates the plight Woolf points toward:

There was Mrs. Manresa, with Giles at her side, heading the procession. In taut plump curves her scarf blew round her shoulders. . . . She looked, as she crossed the lawn to the strains of the gramophone, goddess-like, buoyant, abundant, her cornucopia running over. Bartholomew, following, blessed the power of the human body to make the earth fruitful (119).

Bart, also representative of patriarchal dominance, possesses an attitude that Woolf here seeks to ridicule: woman as an object men may use for their purposes. The doubly ironic twist here is that Manresa is hardly the type of woman Bart imagines her to be; she will use her femininity and men to obtain her goals, just as he will use her. One sees the message of the skits mirrored in the Pointz Hall characters.

After the Age of Reason skit that focuses on the deceit and betrayal of Sir Spaniel and Lady Harpy Harriden, Isa walks to the stable yard where dogs are chained. She meditates on her plight: being used as a donkey to carry loads across the desert "in the long caravanserai" (155). Woolf seems to use caravanserai incorrectly, since it means an inn which serves caravans in the desert; however, in the next phrase that Isa
speaks, she alludes to the inn as she says, "It's a good day, some say, the day we are stripped naked. Others, it's the end of the day. They see the Inn and the Inn's keeper . . . . Always I hear corrupt murmurs; the chink of gold and metal. Mad music . . . " (156). And in the next paragraph, several subjects in my paper are linked in one seemingly incoherent reflection by Isa:

'Oon little donkey, patiently stumble. Hear not the frantic cries of the leaders who in that they seek to lead desert us. Nor the chatter of china faces glazed and hard. Hear rather the shepherd, coughing by the farmyard wall; the withered tree that sighs when the Rider gallops; the brawl in the barrack room when they stripped her naked; or the cry which in London when I thrust the window open someone cries . . . .' (156).

And after this, she immediately sees her husband and Manresa come out of the greenhouse where they have had their tryst.

The emphasis here is on the combination of several subjects I have already discussed. The donkey, a beast of burden, trudges on through the desert, being led by people who abandon it. The donkey represents women, who, though slaves to the men who would lead them, are frequently betrayed by those men, just as Sir Spaniel in the skit and Giles in the setting of Pointz Hall betray the ones to whom they are committed. In
addition to this betrayal is the allusion to the rape at Whitehall where the woman was used as a sexual object for the pleasure of men. In this central scene, Woolf combines several ideas that cause the novel to be linked to the feminist essays: she demonstrates how women are enslaved to the patriarchal system, how they passively follow, and how they are abused by the system that should permit them equity.

In the Victorian skit, the focus is on hypocritical religious zealots and their exploitation of the colonies; Mr. Hardcastle in a prayer to God informs God that they are enlightened (171) and as he speaks, the "hindquarters of the donkey . . . became active" (171). And a few moments later "holding his fossil in front of him, Mr. Hardcastle marched off. The donkey was captured; hampers were loaded; and forming into a procession, the picnickers began to disappear over the hill" (171).

The next exchange is a satire on the idealization of the home. "The gramophone warbled Home, Sweet Home, and Budge, swaying slightly, descended from his box and followed the procession off the stage" (173).

In the pageant the procession serves to remind the reader of the pretension, the self-righteousness, the hypocrisy of the characters acting the parts. The Victorian scene with Budge, the policeman of the world, ends with the young couple saying, "'To convert the heathen! To help our fellow men!' Budge points to Pointz Hall" (172). Not only are the
Victorian colonialists, Woolf says, enslaving women; they would seek to make the whole world subject to them. And as Budge gestures to Pointz Hall, one is reminded of the emptiness of Giles' and Isa's lives, how affluence and education have not brought enlightenment to them. The system has made them meddlesome and domineering. For, like their parents, the Victorians, they are victims of the spiritual isolation and inequality that the patriarchal system perpetuates. The powerful feminist statement that Woolf makes here as well as in *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own* is that evolutionary spiritual change is possible only when both sexes are treated with respect, when women and men are able to grasp each others' hands in equity.

The fourth subject I will analyze in the essays and the novel is the library and the British literary heritage of which the Pointz Hall audience is so proud. That the pageant occupies a central position in the novel's structure implies its importance to Woolf. Also, one notices how the words procession and pageant are used in Woolf's works. The pageant is an overview of British literary history; however, it is inefficacious to awaken the audience to any significant changes in its behavior. The processions take place before, during, after, and between the acts of the pageant. They are important to note because the word procession is repeated so often both in the novel and in the essays.

The skits, Miss LaTrobe, and her intentions may reveal what
Virginia Woolf is satirizing and how she accomplishes the satire. Miss LaTrobe is the woman who writes and who continues in her creative venture even after the pageant concludes. She persists because it is her nature to "make up lines." She presents the didactic pageant to the village to point out flaws that they can learn from and can apply to their lives.

The first skit is the Elizabethan, based loosely on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Twelfth Night*. It has a false Duke, a Princess disguised as a boy, a long lost heir who appears as the beggar, and the Duke’s daughter who falls in love with the Prince who was put in a basket as a baby by an aged crone (88). The plot is not coherent, but of it, the narrator says, "Did the plot matter? . . . There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot" (90). As the short scene ends, the old crone dies, the Prince finds his Princess and a procession forms that leads all out as the interval begins.

This skit amuses the audience, but the audience does not understand it; its thematic basis is deceit and disguise, so the theme of the skit is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s comedies where all conflict is resolved in the end and the main characters live happily ever after despite the double dealings.

The Age of Reason skit is more thoroughly developed with dialogue and is based on Congreve’s *Love for Love* and *The Way of the World*. In it, the older characters plot to seize the
inheritance of a young woman. The older Lady Harpy Harraden promises to give the young woman's inheritance to the older man, Sir Spaniel, with whom she plans an affair. The scheming, deceit, and intrigue that make up the plot are worked out in far more detail than the Elizabethan skit in order to hold up a substantial mirror for the audience.

It is after this scene that Giles invites Mrs. Manresa to the greenhouse for their tryst. The chorus comments on the parallels here between the Restoration comedy and the real life comedy when the actors say, "but we remain forever the same" (139). The stage being empty, LaTrobe knows that she is losing the attention of the audience; however, the cows come to her rescue as they bawl "with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. Then the whole herd caught the infection. Lashing their tails, blobbed like pokers, they tossed their heads high, plunged and bellowed, as if Eros had planted his dart in their flanks" (140). Woolf's ironic message that they, too, are dumb with yearning is not completely lost on the Pointz Hall audience. As the scene ends and Bart comments on the moral, Giles thinks, "Where there's a Will there's a Way. The words rose and pointed a finger of scorn at him. Off to Gretna Green with his girl; the deed done. Damn the consequences. 'Like to see the greenhouse?' he said abruptly, turning to Mrs. Manresa" (149). This is exactly what Isa says to Dodge, later, during the next intermission.
Woolf, with each section of the pageant, indict human deceit. The next part of the play involves Victorian times where Budge, the policeman of the world, is the centerpiece and the two lovers become missionaries who go off to save the world. The names of these characters come from Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, but the plot concerns making a good marriage to a man who is both respectable and chaste. In this scene Woolf, through the character of Miss LaTrobe, asks the Pointz Hall audience to question their forefathers' self-righteousness, their materialistic values, their idealization of the hearth, their manipulation and exploitation of the colonies. And here, again, one person in the audience, Etty Springett, feels that perhaps the skit has insulted her father (173). She understands the message better than most of the audience who are delighted rather than insulted.

In the last skit the audience refuses to look at itself in the mirrors held up for them to examine their motivations, their honesty, and their justice. LaTrobe's audience resents this intrusion and says, "Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts . . . . That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair" (184). They are told by the anonymous voice that they are scraps, orts, and fragments, that they are liars and cheats, that the wall of civilization cannot be built by such as they (188). The response is the infernal gramophone and a speech by the Christian reverend,
Mr. Streatfield, who is a member of the audience. He mounts the stage to "explain" the play to them. He does not see the false faces, the liars, the cheats, the manipulators and schemers that the skits have portrayed. He completely misinterprets the pageant and sends the audience on its way with their own views. That the money collected will go to illumine the village church is the final cutting irony. In the satires and parodies of British literature, Woolf says that religion, the arts, drama, and literature are not able to illumine the mind of mankind. Her message at the end of the pageant is that the audience resists seeing itself; at the end of the novel when Isa and Giles argue, she reveals more clearly that the violence in the private house parallels the violence in the political world.

The central message in the skits is that literature fails to wake the consciousness of its audience; hence, it is not efficacious. Alexander Zwerdling argues that as Woolf revised Pointz Hall into Between the Acts, she strengthened her political critique of British culture (256). In Zwerdling's view, "Cultural tradition . . . lost its authority" (316). And the critic Sallie Sears notes that the pageant indicts English character and history, as well as the imitation of the literary past. That the parodies have not been identified and the pageant has not been given careful attention until recently is surprising because the pageant indicts the audience at Pointz Hall; it receives the "pointed
finger of the words" that rise up and accuse Giles, that point to Manresa, and that reveal the intrigues in their lives that parallel so concisely the intrigues in the lives of the pageant's characters. The pageant's characters represent the foibles of the human condition and serve in Woolf's novel to teach not only the audience at Pointz Hall, but to teach the reader.

The four subjects in the novel Between the Acts which I have examined serve as a warning and as a recapitulation of Woolf's efforts in her two non-fiction feminist works to persuade her audience of the urgency for change. As she wrote, the bombs drove her and Leonard from London to Rodmell in the countryside. There, a bomb came close enough to destroy the gate near their house. Woolf demonstrated that the price of war is the dissolution of civilization, that without a unifying force in our lives, all is chaos. She showed the connections between dictatorships in the home and in the public arena by revealing in the novel and in the feminist essays the plight of unappreciated women. Woolf forced readers see the connection between the instinctual violent tendencies and our prehistoric past by putting it in a new perspective so that we could alter our behavior. And true to the satirist's method, she accomplished these by using the mirror of a play, actually, two plays, in which we can see ourselves: the pageant itself and the novel which contains it. The writer parodies literary history so that we
may better see its ineffectiveness. However, with the readers’ perspective, we may be able to understand its thrust as the novel applies to our lives. That the same subjects appear in the feminist polemics and the novels should not surprise us, as Woolf focused on the plight of women all of her life. Interesting, however, we see how the subjects provide a unity of purpose and a vision that remain consistent as she developed the novel out of the essays.

Mitchell Leaska in *Pointz Hall: the Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts* concludes that one must read all of Woolf’s books to appreciate any of them (465). At the various stages of her life, the tone of each work is affected by the circumstances of the world. *Between the Acts* possesses a dark, pessimistic tone because the world is once again in a war that threatens to destroy civilization. The urgency of her message in *Three Guineas* goes unheeded and as a result, the plea inscribed in *Between the Acts* turns to despair as Woolf portrays a society satisfied with patriarchy. As she works to awaken that society from the self-satisfied slumber induced by the processions that have led humanity to the cataclysmic precipice, she despairs at having her message understood.

The final scene in the novel is the beginning of another act of a play. Giles and Isa remind humanity of its great flaw in this scene. The reader, as he imagines the play, sees humanity locked into the consequences of choices based on the false standard of patriarchy. Woolf’s bleak implication
follows the words that appear at the end: "Then the curtain rose. They spoke" (219). Her ending implies that little hope remains for people blind to their own impulses, their own failures, their own mis-communications. Woolf's tone implies that both the domestic and the political wars will be perpetuated because of humanity's failure to learn.
NOTES


3 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, 1957) 50. In all other references to this essay, the title will be shortened to Room.

4 Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas (New York: Harcourt, 1966) 5. In all other references to this essay, the title will be shortened to Three.

5 Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts (New York: Harcourt, 1969) 83. In all other references to this novel, the title will be shortened to BTA.

6 Many examples of Isa's dreamy and romantic character exist. On pages 51, 103, and 104, 113, 156, and 181 are statements and fragments of poetry that reflect her disconnection with reality, as she frequently fantasizes about death or suicide.

7 Three 60.

8 The words "caravan," "procession," and "pageant" hold a singular importance for Woolf and can be found in Diary V, A Room of One's Own, The Years, Three Guineas, as well as Between the Acts. These words occur at the beginnings and endings of many chapters of The Years which was previously named The Caravan according to the Diary entry of January 11, 1935. The significance of these additions has not gained notice; however, Grace Radin, in her book, Virginia Woolf's The Years: The Evolution of a Novel, shows that the beginnings and endings of chapters were rewritten two months before Woolf published The Years which had been separated from Three Guineas.

10 Sears, 225.
PRIMARY SOURCES

SECONDARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES, cont.


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