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# “Life is a Solid Substance”:

## Materialism and the Use of Objects in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

*Madeline Thatcher*

“It is only in the world of objects that we have time and space and selves.”

—T.S. Eliot

Because of its lack of a cohesive plot, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* is extremely well-suited for examining the development of character, of place, and of objects. The novel, which relies heavily on a “stream of consciousness” style of writing, uses these elements as footholds for the reader by grounding the novel in something tangible. This paper proposes that although the characters that Woolf depicts within her work may vary in their relationship to solid objects, she herself is writing a novel where *objects* are at the very center. It is true that the term “objects” is fraught with multiple interpretations in scholarship over the past few years, but Jane Bennett succinctly explains how Woolf uses these items in her recent publication, *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett classifies “objects” as materials “that appear as they are to a subject,” only able to be engaged with by humans, as compared to “things,” which are considered such “the moment when the object becomes the Other” or when a “thing” gains the ability to think and act of its own accord (2). In *The Waves*, materialism—objects—has the power to draw human beings toward one

another and foster a sense of connection between characters, and as such, Bennett's definition seems most fitting; these objects are controlled by the humans who interact with them, rather than the other way around.

Douglas Mao examines a similar vein of materialist research in his text, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production*. Mao attempts to unravel the experiment that is *The Waves*, finding that this literary trial delves into the lack of life's substantive material and comes on the cusp of a larger modernist movement later described by Mao himself. He considers the true "modernist vision" as one of the "predicament of the object, a vision of the modern age as one in which the particular, the concrete, and the auratic were threatened as never before by habits of generalization and abstraction serving a newly triumphant science" (6-7). Mao summarizes Woolf's project in his assertion that modernism, "touches directly upon the question of whether art serves aesthetic experience or vice versa, whether value at last resides in the beautiful perception or the beautiful thing, in the passing moment or the enduring object" (36). While this explanation is not directly applied to *The Waves*, it certainly fits, as each of the six principle characters grapple within themselves to determine which experience—the perception or the object—should be taken as reality.

This dichotomy seems to be at the very center of modernist studies—is it an age dominated by objects, by machinery, by a lack of human connection? Or is it an era that flourishes on the abstract, on the ethereal, on the unattainable, in an attempt to "only connect?"<sup>1</sup> Woolf herself engages with Mao's proposed "predicament" in her short story, "Solid Objects," from which Mao's work draws its title. The story details the relationship between two friends, John and Charles, where the former, after discovering a "large, irregular lump" of sea glass at the beach, becomes obsessed with "possessing objects" in order to add to his collection; and the latter, who cannot understand "the truth of it," eventually leaves his friend "for ever," alone with his "pretty stones" (Dick 107). While Mao asserts that there is "danger [in] allowing the aesthetic vision to completely overcome the practical vision," it seems this is only true in Charles' case. When he asks John, "What was the truth of it? What made you give it up like that all in a second?" John replies, "I've not given it up," and upon further protests from Charles, declares, "I don't agree with you" (106). If we are to consider the inflexible "truth" both John and Charles seem to seek as true relationships with fellow humans, it is therefore obvious that no single "truth" exists. Rather, "truth" is relative, for while one considers truth to be lost among "the lump of glass and the star-shaped china," the other considers it to be found by means of the same

methods (105). Essentially, the purpose of objects in creating meaningful relations with other people differs between humans—some may find them useful, while others still may see them as hindrances to true understanding.

Mao dubs this focus on objects and their subsequent effects on their owners as “making,” a deliberate act that effectively removes human influence in the process of creating and using an object. In relation to *The Waves*, he declares, “[The novel] confirms that Woolf was intensely, if not continuously, concerned about the element of domination [over the human] in making,” in short stating Woolf was suspicious of any sort of “material reality” seeing as objects supposedly rejected any need for human connection (76). To say so implies Woolf favored arguments against “making,” or against objects (and therefore experiences) that appear manufactured. Even in implication, it seems much too arbitrary a claim, too simplified, seeing as “the truth of it all” in “Solid Objects” can—and does—exist within both the rejection and acceptance of “making.” Ultimately, then, it is possible for Woolf to be ascribing to both interpretive meanings in “Solid Objects”; that connection is relative to each individual, and that while some may see objects as detrimental to forming fulfilling and legitimate connections, others still find that physical manifestations of their innermost thoughts bring about a clearer understanding of the transcendent “truth” her characters seem to be seeking.

It is therefore imperative that *The Waves* be examined for evidence of both “truths”—as those who discover a sense of self through objects and those who cannot do so, in order to be compared to Woolf’s overarching use of objects in order to create relationships between her characters. To do so, this paper will examine Bernard, Louis, and Rhoda, as they each display distinct attitudes towards objects and materialism.<sup>2</sup> This idea of relative connection would naturally be examined through character development, especially in *The Waves* where there is little to be said of plot and much to be said of the internal life of each of the main protagonists. Whereas Mao depicts Woolf’s novel as one where human interaction is considered a “a strange and disturbing imposition on an innocent landscape,” it seems that some characters and Woolf herself believe otherwise due to a definitive reliance on objects within the novel to instigate such interactions (Mao 192). However, it is also necessary to determine which school of thought Woolf herself falls into, for it seems impossible that a writer as experimental as Woolf would fail to establish her own definitive views on the subject. Although perhaps inadvertently, Woolf seems to demonstrate the intrinsic power of objects in fostering connection, displayed in the

few but forceful interactions where all six of the main characters interact with one another.

Much of the scholarship regarding *The Waves* seems to revolve around Bernard, and rightly so, given that his narrative voice constructs much of the novel's contents.<sup>3</sup> His role as unofficial leader of the group adds an overarching framework for *The Waves*, a much-needed semblance of structure in a novel that lacks a plot to perform such an act. Bernard's portions of the book are driven by his inner quest to create a legacy for himself that will remain long after he is gone, and he often finds himself thinking of his future biographer who will diligently record his achievements for future generations. He quotes extensively from this imaginary figure, who he imagines will write of his subject as one "possessed [of] a logical sobriety," a man "abnormally aware of [his] circumstances" (76). The way in which Bernard intends to find this "logical sobriety" is by transforming abstract concepts—which are much larger than human experience—into objects that he can manipulate. He converses with the reader (or is it his biographer?), suggesting, "Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we can turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story" (251). Life, something that cannot be touched, becomes an object that can be moved about by Bernard, making him a ruler and organizer over what is usually construed as eternal chaos. Bernard is compelled to do this, seeing as he cannot fathom comprehending life itself without any sort of physical framework. At one point he states, "How to describe the world seen without a self? There are no words" (287). In this manner, Bernard seeks to oversee both his fate and those of his friends, as one who can see the end from the beginning—the "Alpha and Omega" of *The Waves*.

But this changes; Bernard undergoes a "gradual transformation" as he attempts to understand how things can exist without being grounded in something solid, or can be experienced in a way to which words cannot do justice. He finds there are seemingly physical manifestations of human relationships that may feel tangible but are in fact intangible—such as the birth of his son—and as a writer, Bernard eventually learns that when describing feelings or experiences, it is foolish to use words or to use objects. His desires to be remembered, to be celebrated, to be worshipped—these are things that can be understood only through intuition and feeling because these desires stem from the very depths of man's heart, a place "immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness" due to its capacity to feel both joy and pain. There

exists an eternal paradox within Bernard, because of the infinite possibilities that exist within his own imagination. Mao contends that in the final passages of *The Waves*, Bernard experiences “a yearning not for airy ghostliness but for solidity of self and in things,” thus proving to the reader that Woolf, like Bernard, desires to “oppose flux. . . with a fixing figured as an actual solidification of the evanescent” (71). However, this seems an inaccurate reading of Bernard’s final expressions of self; he proclaims he longs to be “a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things,” but is impeded by objects, reminded of his solidity as he “leans one elbow on the table, and holds in his left hand a glass of old brandy” (*Waves* 292). The enemy is not “death” as Bernard believes it to be, but rather “eyes meeting ours; the effort waiting” the immutable force that requires humanity to “call the waiter” and “pay the bill,” after which they must “find [their] coats” (293). Bernard has no reason to desire for “solidity of self and in things,” for such solidity is already within his possession.

Bernard’s metamorphosis is a replica of a similar change that exists as a bridge between Woolf’s earlier novel, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. In the former, Mrs. Ramsay portrays the central and formative character, a matriarchal figure dedicated to bringing her family and her guests together as they spend the summer months on holiday. Her husband, Mr. Ramsay, seems a cold and detached partner and father in comparison to Mrs. Ramsay’s distinctive communicative powers, a scholar determined to publish a novel that will be remembered long after he himself has passed away. However, it is later revealed that Mr. Ramsay is struggling to come to term with his own mortality; while he was assured he had “a splendid mind. . . he had not genius” (34). Despite his attempts to grasp the whole of human understanding—a process he compares to the ordering of the alphabet—he cannot do so. He remains staunchly at “Q,” realizing he can never reach “Z.” He will not be remembered as the one man “in a thousand million” to “reach Z after all” (35).

Then comes *The Waves*, and Bernard, much like Mr. Ramsay, is obsessed with finding something that will stand the test of time, in this case his biography. His fellow characters also recognize his constructed lifestyle. Neville notes, “Bernard is posing as a literary man; Bernard is thinking of his biographer” (79). In other words, Bernard is posing as one who is obsessed with and able to comprehend the purpose behind objects. However, Bernard comes to desire something much greater for himself than simply being a permanent fixture in modern history—his desire to “be a whole universe”—to be infinite—speaks to

an aspiration not described nor contained by objects, one that must be experienced without the use of things.

Such is not the case with Louis, who instead seeks to use objects to elevate himself above his peers. Louis is the literal outsider of the group, the son of a banker in Brisbane, Australia, and therefore not properly “English.” Because of his foreign background, Louis uses materialism to his advantage and sees objects as literal stepping stones on which he might climb in order to appear superior to his friends. Much like Bernard, he seeks to obtain something long lasting, but unlike Bernard, he finds such a legacy in objects, regardless of whether or not he himself feels successful. This begins during his days at school; one afternoon, he lags behind to show one of his instructors his work. “I show my essay to Mr. Barker,” says Louis. “This will endure” (39).

After school, Louis again sets himself apart from his peers as he desires to obtain objects in an effort to set himself apart. While Bernard and Neville “go to Oxford or Cambridge,” evidently to obtain knowledge or prestige, things that cannot be held or displayed, Louis instead goes “to make money,” preferring to obtain physical representations of his worth rather than an aura of success (65). His desire for objects eventually escalates until it has consumed him. This is evident during an interaction with the group as a whole, in which Louis declares,

I beg you also to notice my cane and my waistcoat. I have inherited a desk of solid mahogany in a room hung with maps. Our steamers have won an enviable reputation for the cabins replete with luxury. We supply swimming-baths and gymnasiums. I wear a white waistcoat now and consult a little book before I make an engagement. (219)

This statement is almost entirely overcome with objects—the desk, the maps, the steamers, the gymnasiums, the expensive waistcoat, the little book—and as such there is little to be said of Louis as a character. Rather, he seems to be a compilation of his desk, his maps, his swimming-baths—a solid object that merely appears to be human.

This “cyborg” seems entirely separate and apart from Rhoda, who, it seems in direct opposition to Louis, offers perhaps the most forceful rejection of the world of materialism, but certainly not in any orthodox manner. Rhoda feels that objects prevent her from properly connecting to the physical reality she finds herself attempting to understand. And unlike Bernard, this rejection is not in any attempt to reach something more ethereal. Rather than advocating

that others realize the difficulty in human connection and therefore shun the use of objects, Rhoda longs for an emotional attachment to the world of things.

This is noted most overtly in Rhoda's self-deprecating title "No Face," which is repeated in almost every section of the novel. We first are introduced to Rhoda's perception of herself in the first portion of *The Waves* when Rhoda arrives at boarding school. After finding herself alone and isolated in a world of objects and of people who understand them, she declares, "Here I am nobody. I have no face" (33). Her first identifying label, "nobody" is interesting when dissected into the words that create the compound: "no" and "body." When examined in isolation, these words seem to indicate that Rhoda does not in fact have any physical form, rather than a mere feeling of separateness. She is unable to be anyone, to have any sort of "face" without a physical frame on which to place it. It is imperative for Rhoda to gain access to objects in order to completely exist.

Rhoda also acknowledges her lack of connection to others as a result of her insubstantial state. Later in the same section, she tells the reader, "I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces. . . Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy" (43). This particular line works well with Jinny's clothing-dependent character, seeing as the dresses so central to Jinny's power of connection can only be laid upon a physical form. The reference to "lift[ing heavy] things" could also be seen as an allusion to Susan and her children, where Susan finds life heavy under "wrinkled thighs and sagging breasts" (131). Such is a welcome weight, one that brings about a "bestial and beautiful passion," of which Rhoda can only dream. Rhoda is desperate for this kind of connection, and the others notice. During the scene where the characters join together to celebrate Percival's departure for India, Louis spots Rhoda in the crowd approaching their table and perceives how unsettling interaction with others is to her. "We wake her. We torture her," he notes. "She dreads, us, despises us, yet comes cringing to our sides because for all our cruelty there is always some name, some face, which sheds a radiance, which lights up her pavements, and makes it possible for her to replenish her dreams" (117). In light of her desire to "replenish her dreams," Rhoda's suicide is seen as a direct result of her failure to connect with the physical world.

Her foreshadowed death by objects—or lack thereof—is described when she states, "I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some

hard door to call myself back to my body” (44). Here, Rhoda associates physical pain with reality; her desire to touch and to be touched is achieved through solitary efforts to bring about some kind of sensation that physically resonates within her. Further foreshadowing occurs when she states, “All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors forever. What then can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely” (159). Here it seems that Rhoda has at last accepted the lack of success reality attempts to offer her. It seems fitting therefore that in her ultimate attempt to retrieve her “forgotten face” as a result of “flutter[ing] unattached, without anchorage anywhere, unconsolidated, incapable of composing any blankness of continuity or wall against which these bodies move” would be death, a primal, physical act through which Rhoda might enter another world devoid of objects, one where she might invariably find her place.

However, there are a few key moments of connection in which all six of the characters interact with one another, and it is here where Woolf’s true opinions on materialism shine through. While these characters might find themselves divided on how they view the purpose of objects in their world, Woolf clearly sees materials as a means by which her creations can interact with one another. *The Waves* is in this way a physical manifestation of Woolf’s ideal novel, where “At first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all; and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room we see how complete the story is” (*The Essays* 162). This is evident from the first page of *The Waves*.

In the initial lines, we are introduced to the group of six, and it is by their observation of their surroundings (literally “discerning shapes”) that we understand both the relationship between the characters and the setting in which they find themselves. Two thirds of the characters describe their setting in ways that objectify their placement; the sun becomes “a ring,” “a slab of pale yellow,” and “a globe hanging down in a drop against the. . . hill” (9). After interpreting these varied interpretations of the sunrise, the reader is able to gather that these six characters are close to one another, both physically as they are describing the same phenomenon at the same time, and in a more personal manner, as they seem to feel comfortable vocalizing their inner thoughts to one another. While this “vocalizing” eventually is recognized as soliloquies only the principle character at that time can know, this introduction, written in such a way that it

imitates a conversation, implies that objects are necessary in cultivating a sense of understanding and fellowship.

Soon after this first section, the characters part ways, only to reconvene years later when their mutual friend Percival is set to depart for India. Neville arrives first, and after being seated, notes, “This table, these chairs, this metal vase with its three red flowers are about to undergo an extraordinary transformation” (118). Neville is able to foresee the table filled with friends, during which the objects that construct their gathering spot will no longer be simply objects, but a part of the larger group. Although “things quiver as if not yet in being,” once all are seated, they may “say, brutally and directly, what is in [their] minds” (119). It is after this that the soliloquies cease to be isolated statements of feeling and instead are transformed into dialogue. The “I’s of the characters disappear and are replaced with the communal “we.” Individuals do not stand alone, do not remain as Bernard, or Jinny, or Rhoda, but instead become an “us,” a conglomerate party that simultaneously “drove through the streets,” where “*our* names [were] painted in white letters on our boxes” as “we clasped the flowers with their green leaves rustling in garlands” (120, emphasis added). Bernard summarizes this collective experience most succinctly when he declares, “We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. . . [by] red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many petalled. . . a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution” (127). It is the flower—an object—that stands literally at the center of group, and to which each individual adds a petal to make this object, in its vase, something beautiful and whole. Together as one, they agree “our senses have widened. Membranes, webs of nerve that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float round us like filaments, making the air tangible” (135).

In the final scenes of the novel, the characters once more come together at Hampton Court, and it is here that objects seem to foster the most complete of connections. Bernard, again acting as the narrative leader of the group, offers the most inclusive picture of the six and the objects that bring them together. He asks, “How many telephone calls, how many post cards, are now needed to cut this hole through which we come together, united, at Hampton Court? . . . We are all swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar they cast no shade . . . I am wedged into my place in the puzzle” (216). The group becomes an object, a puzzle, in which each individual plays a distinct and shapely role. The “torrent of things,” the objects that make up life, have brought them together once again.

In their final moments together as a group, Bernard urges, “Let us stay for a moment. . . before we go. Let us pace the terrace by the river almost alone. . . What a sense of the tolerableness of life the lights in the bedrooms of the small shopkeepers give us! . . . How we worship the sound like the knocking together of trucks in a siding!” (234). This is profoundly significant; before the friends part for the last time, Bernard, again using the all encompassing “we,” finds solace and purpose in objects, in the sounds they make in their togetherness. Life most certainly becomes a solid substance, a substance with the power to draw individuals together. This section, the last of *The Waves* to include all of the characters, leaves the reader and the characters both gazing at the “many-sided substance cut out of [the] dark; a many-faceted flower” as Bernard tells his audience, “Stop for a moment; *let us behold what we have made*” (229, emphasis added).

It may seem strange to engage with Woolf as an author (at least in part) in support of materialism when she so adamantly opposed other writers who were regarded as such.<sup>4</sup> To the authors she dubs as “materialists,” she considers their only value to be in demonstrating “what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, we do not wish to do” (“Modern” 158). However, my argument places Woolf within the camp she so detested, as a writer who “writes of unimportant things; that they should make the trivial and transitory appear the true and enduring”; but such is not the case (159). There is evidence to support this, despite Woolf’s personal claim against such a label. Woolf inadvertently challenged her own stance on what is “true and enduring” when she wrote both “Solid Objects” and *The Waves*, in which she clearly demonstrates that the things she considered “trivial” are in fact the driving factors behind the connections between her characters. Woolf, therefore, deserves to be judged perhaps more heavily on her fiction than her nonfiction, as this genre of work appropriately responds both in form and in function to her forbearers and contemporaries against whom she took up figurative arms.

Mr. Bennett, Mr. Wells, and Mr. Galsworthy, whom she criticizes so harshly in both “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” wrote in a style that depicted merely the “outer life,” whereas Woolf adamantly supports the drafting of the “inner life,” making the biased nature of the importance of objects something impossible to describe. In the latter essay, she writes, “[Mr. Bennett] is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living

there" (16). Essentially, Mr. Bennett and his colleagues expected objects to create their own meaning; while humans might use them or live within them, they contained their own entity, a soul of sorts that existed in some higher plane than human consciousness could comprehend. For Woolf, objects are akin to the atom she so fondly describes as the matter of life. Simultaneously solid but empty, atoms—and by extension objects—construct the framework for existence but cannot lend meaning to it.<sup>5</sup> Rather, they provide a canvas upon which humans may impose their desires and their dreams, lending meaning to their relationships in ways that can be represented or interpreted by objects.

As such, Woolf herself is in fact the materialist; Mr. Bennett and those like him should instead be considered "vital materialists," or those who expect objects to act for themselves, and in turn affect their agency on human subjects. Coined by Jane Bennett, these kinds of objects are separate and apart, a higher form of matter than humans, unable to be imposed upon by the former. The objects in Woolf's work, and especially in *The Waves*, contain no such power. They are wholly and completely dependent on the humans who use them, and therefore gain their meaning and their purpose from the same. The characters depicted by the likes of Mr. Bennett find connection despite the ideology of materialism that interferes with their existence—Woolf's come together because of it. Woolf's friend and fellow writer E. M. Forster describes her writing style best when he writes:

Like most novelists worth reading, she strays from the fictional norm. She dreams, designs, jokes, invokes, observes details, but she does not tell a story or weave a plot, and—can she create character? That is her problem's centre. . . . Plot and story could be set aside in favour of some other unity, but if one is writing about human beings, one does want them to seem alive. *Did she get her people to live?* (Forster 16, emphasis added)

Forster's question lies at the very heart of Woolf's attempts at fiction, and what I believe finds an affirmative answer in *The Waves*, because of her reliance on objects. If "living" within novels can be defined as realistic interactions between characters, Woolf certainly succeeds, despite the personalized views of individualized characters that may suggest otherwise.

But in this declarative stance on materialism, there lies the possibility for didacticism that seems so out of tune with modernism as a whole. Mao argues for such a reading; in one instance, Mao approaches "Solid Objects" as a short story with a purposeful and a direct agenda when he says, "Solid Objects'

might be read as a projection of the Victorian childhood onto a modern adulthood, a discreet subversion that takes the nineteenth century at its word (to children) while deploying that word against it. A standard piece of Victorian advice on child-rearing was to make one's child a collector. . ." (29). To read "Solid Objects"—and therefore *The Waves*—as a "projection" of an adolescent Victorian mind frame fits, at least in part, with the idea of modernism as a movement. Most scholars see modernism as a rejection of Victorian ideals; Mao's reading of "Solid Objects" therefore works well in this vein.

However, if we are then to read the works of Woolf in this light—as an unabashed rebellion against the production of her predecessors—her writings would be just as hypocritical as they are groundbreaking. But because of her subtle nod to the subjective nature of truth in relation to objects as exhibited by the characters in *The Waves*, as well as her overt reliance on objects to foster connection between her characters, Woolf is able to be lauded as an extremely mature writer. She is one who understands the nuances of human connection, and one of profound conviction, solidified in her views regarding the use of objects in daily life. Essentially, this paper is offering a reclassification of Woolf, and an opportunity to examine her work in a light previously considered impossible, due in part to scholars as well as Woolf herself. *The Waves* is a perfect example of Woolf's work in relation to materialism, and therefore deserves careful additional study. In this, the critic, alongside Neville, can say in unison, "The light falls upon real objects now" (127).

## Endnotes

- 1 "Only connect..." stands as the epigraph for E.M. Forster's novel *Howards End*. This theme has played a large role in determining the role of objects in modernist literature, as described by Melanie Williams in her article, "Only Connect: *Howards End* and Theories of Justice," where she claims, "Forster, through [*Howards End*], produces a developed examination of the necessary linkage between the words of the abstract and the contingent." This argument can be extrapolated to include the representation of the people themselves within *Howards End*; the struggle between the Wilcox and the Schlegel families as physical manifestations of the outer life of objects and the inner life of emotions respectively is key to the novel as a whole.
- 2 For the sake of space, this paper excludes the study of Ginny, Neville, and Susan. However, they are each represented in the group gatherings in the latter portion of this publication.

- 3 Bernard's narrative comprises 45.1% of *The Waves*; Neville comes in second, with 13.9% of the text as his own.
- 4 Her "quarrel" was specifically directed to a "Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennet, and Mr. Galsworthy" as addressed in her essay, "Modern Fiction."
- 5 This concept is explored in Sam Mitchell's University of Richmond's honor's thesis, "The Stuff of Thought: Virginia Woolf's Object Lessons" (2011).

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