



All Student Publications

2016-06-01

The Need for Shadows: The Death of the Ego for Virginia Woolf in *Night and Day*

Jennifer A. Beck Miss
beckjennbeck007@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Beck, Jennifer A. Miss, "The Need for Shadows: The Death of the Ego for Virginia Woolf in *Night and Day*" (2016). *All Student Publications*. 160.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/160>

This Class Project or Paper is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Student Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Jennifer Beck

Dr. Jarica Watts

English 495

16 December 2015

The Need for Shadows: The Death of the Ego for Virginia Woolf in *Night and Day*.

Virginia Woolf believes that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” and judging by her early writing this observation is true (“Mr. Bennett” 4). In her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Woolf tries to create a modern character that desires isolation from the rest of the world, but who also struggles to fit into British society. In constructing her narrative, Woolf took the Georgian literary style and tries to infuse it with modern thought. As James King explains in his biography of Woolf, “When Lytton told her that he felt that *The Voyage Out* failed in its overall conception, she admitted in her reply that he was correct. Somehow her aim of presenting the vast tumult of life had, she now felt, overwhelmed rather than enriched the book” (233). It would take some time before Woolf would understand that it was not really the tumult of life that overwhelms her novel, but an unidentified loss regarding the human character was her real stumbling block.

Four years later Woolf resurrects this narrative form in her second novel *Night and Day*, returning to delve deeper into the fracture of society from not only an outer perspective but also focusing on the internal struggle to find self. Many critics, such as Suzanne Raitt and Ann-Marie Priest, see *Night and Day* as a failed attempt to break free from patriarchal control and as permission for a heroine to escape into nothingness. However, these critics fail to account for Woolf’s opinion that along with the change in character “[a]ll human relations have [also] shifted...And when human relations change there is at the same time a change” in every other

aspect of the human condition (“Mr. Bennett” 5). In *Night and Day*, Woolf examines the human condition by destroying the identity of her heroine and following her reconstruction of self, which inadvertently casts a melancholic tone over the novel. Woolf undertakes this destruction of self to evaluate just how far the human character has changed and where this change will lead the modern novelist.

After reading the draft for *Night and Day*, we learn from Suzanne Riatt’s introduction that Leonard Woolf problematizes the melancholic element within the story. His criticism did not faze Virginia Woolf though. She felt that “If one is to deal with people on a large scale & say what one thinks, how can one avoid melancholy?...as the current answers don’t do, one has to grope for a new one, & the process of discarding the old, when one is by no means certain what to put in their place, is a sad one” (Riatt qtd. in xvi). Woolf’s observation of melancholia would suggest that she was familiar with Sigmund Freud’s theory of the same subject, which he wrote about in his paper “Mourning and Melancholia” in 1917, the same year Woolf was writing *Night and Day*.

Although these two great minds would not meet until 1939 and Woolf swore she did not read his work until after they had met, Freud’s theory of melancholia resonates throughout her second novel (Briggs). Julia Briggs, in her talk given at the Charleston Festival in 2006, suggest that Woolf knew Freud’s theory much sooner than she realized. Although both Woolf and James Joyce openly rejected the Freudian theory as they felt it “influenced how they represented their characters’ thoughts” both of them could not escape what society accepted as psychological breakthroughs (Briggs). According to Leonard Woolf’s journal he became acquainted with Freud in 1914 and read the translation of Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* admiring him so much, that he took on a project, at great expense, to print his translated works in 1924.

Meanwhile, the Starchey brothers were also taken with Freud and Briggs believes they probably, with the enthusiasm of Leonard Woolf, brought the Freudian ideas into the Bloomsbury circle and the unconscious notice of Woolf (Briggs). If Woolf did not accept psychoanalysis, why did she accept a melancholic tone for her second novel when it tended to lean toward Freudism?

To understand this question, we need to look into Freud's study of the subject and define the modernist view of melancholia. Freud begins his analysis by comparing mourning with melancholia; both require a loss and pain, however, when the loss moves from a conscious, specific, and a known object to an unconscious, abstract, and unknown object, that is when we get the distinction between mourning and melancholia. Freud explains that for Melancholia

[t]he object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object...one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost (245).

Because the patient's consciousness cannot see what is gone, the patient's ego (the intimate understanding of society, which allows one to adapt to their world) takes the hit and dissolves until it is replaced (245).

At the conclusion of his essay, Freud boils down melancholia to "three preconditions...—loss of the object, ambivalence, and regression of libido into the ego" (258). As I have already defined "loss" on a melancholia scale, it would be useful to define ambivalence and regression of the ego. According to Freud, melancholia is a war between oppositions. He explains,

In melancholia... countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object,

the other to maintain this position of the libido against the assault” (Freud 256).

As this war between acceptance and denial rages, the patient has a hard time dealing with the social niceties around him, and so he escapes to his id (or internal world of fantasy) and replaces his dead ego with libido (Freud 244). All these symptoms manifest themselves within Woolf’s heroine Katharine, and her struggle for identity becomes clear when we connect it with the concept of a lost unknown object.

Woolf’s novel begins by defining Katharine with the introduction of the ghost of Richard Alardyce, her great-grandfather. His possessions litter the Hilbrey house casting a large shadow over Katharine. As Woolf explains, Katharine’s early life was saturated with her poetic ancestor, from a photograph of his gravesite above her cradle to pilgrimages to his gravesite on the anniversary of his death. As a child, she was presented to strangers and given blessings telling her “that she must mind and be a good girl, or detect a look in her face something like Richard’s as a small boy...and she was sent back to the nursery very proud, and with a mysterious sense of an important and unexplained state of things, which time...unveiled to her” (*Night and Day* 34-35). In this stifling environment, Katharine is limited in her social progression and is left with a choice. Katharine must either live the life of a poet when she does not possess the heart of one or she must reinvent herself.

These choices are why the death of her ego is such an overwhelming trial; Katharine’s very existence needs refining. As the disappointment of not fitting in her social world mounts, her identity takes the biggest hit. As Ali Günes states, “What Katharine needs...is to bring down all the traditional values before she goes ahead in the pursuit of her own voice” (120). And Woolf attempts such a pursuit. Katharine’s loss of her social footing begins to manifest itself by erasing her self-image. Her lack of identity shows in Woolf’s description of her room, her dream

world, her failure to follow through with her convictions, and her interest in math and astronomy.

Woolf only gives us one description of Katharine's room, and this through the eyes of her very eccentric cousin, Cassandra. Identifying characters by their environment is an Edwardian convention that subtly defines character ("Mr. Bennett" 125). Cassandra sees Katharine's room as a "combination of luxury and bareness" (360). The luxurious items within Katharine's room: the full length mirror, silk dressing gowns, and slippers show her family's place within the upper-middle class. None of these items scream "heir to the Alardyce literary legacy." The bareness of her walls, the collections of skewered bills, and the small shelf of schoolbooks also offer no clear view of the passions in her life. In fact, they trap her in the society that she currently resides in. The bills connect her back to her family, and the schoolbooks were a link to her past when she was ordained as Alardyce's heir. All the characters in the novel and their rooms offer some understanding of who they are: Rodney with his first editions, Mary with her spacious room and homely crafts, Mrs. Hilbrey with her piles of papers and pens, Cassandra with her silkworms, and Ralph with his injured rook and its perch, offers some depth and a purpose within the novel. We get no such confirmation of character from Katharine's room, her outer world's ego.

Katharine's inner or dream world (id) faces a similar challenge. In this world, Katharine believes she becomes someone else as she seeks "a place where feelings were liberated from the constraint which the real world puts upon them; and the process of awakening was always marked by resignation and a kind of stoical acceptance of facts" and an openly passionate relationship with a mysterious and faceless hero (*Night and Day* 145). Since this world is familiar compared to the outer world that doesn't hold a place for her, she continually escapes inwardly. Freud would say this is due to her id's attempt to hold onto her old

status in a literary world, and I believe Woolf would agree. After all, we see no clear signs of logic or the sciences in her dream state. What she dreams of is a release that comes from poetic acceptance, which she openly opposes. For example, when she explains to Denham why she hates books and literature it all centers around feelings: "Why do you want to be for ever talking about your feelings? That's what I can't make out. And poetry's all about feelings--novels are all about feelings?" (149). Her suppression of emotion creates silences and emotional detachment that become extremely pragmatic in her pursuit to connect to something outside of herself.

Woolf explains this beautifully, when Katharine tries to define love:

She thought of three different scenes; she thought of Mary...saying, 'I'm in love[']...she thought of Rodney losing his self-consciousness among the dead leaves, and speaking with the abandonment of a child; she thought of Denham leaning upon the stone parapet and talking to the distant sky...Her mind passing from Mary to Denham, from William to Cassandra, and from Denham to herself...seemed to be tracing out the lines of some symmetrical pattern, some arrangement of life, which invested, if not herself, at least the others, not only with interest, but with a kind of tragic beauty (329-330).

Katharine can see and acknowledge this outer world, which is full of connections and patterns, but once she tries to connect with it or someone in this world, she immediately withdraws herself and seeks shelter in her fantasy world.

As her ego (externally and internally) dissolves, her self-doubt and lack of conviction are not surprising. Throughout the novel, Katharine takes on the belief that the only way to gain independence is through marriage. Her desire for freedom leads her to accept Rodney's offer of marriage. The engagement is not to Katharine's liking, and she comes to see that marriage to Rodney doesn't offer freedom, it sucks her deeper into her old world. As the narrator explains,

“in her case the questions became phantoms directly she tried seriously to find an answer, which proved that the traditional answer would be of no use to her individually” (328). This realization that tradition doesn’t offer her anything new should push her away, but like her id manipulating her inner world, it also takes over in this instance and makes her doubt her doubts. So that after she breaks off her engagement to Rodney, she quickly reaccepts his proposal. This same practice will ultimately lead her to accept an engagement with Ralph, after telling him that marriage between them would be impossible. Her subconscious is taking over to protect her until she finds a new ego to replace the one destroyed.

Katharine dabbles in replacing her lost ego with a more scientific one by embracing math and astronomy, but her interests in these subjects cannot override the disappointment of not living up to her family potential. We see this when Katharine decides to share her passion with her cousin Henry. In her imagination, she imagines her cousin stating, "something about the difficulties of mathematics, and remarked that very little was known about the stars" (*Night and Day* 201). Her imaginary conversation expresses her lack of confidence in building an outer world on these subjects, which is a shame as these two disciplines are concrete in their logic and would offer her a more modern lifestyle. As “Woolf argues in “Professions for Women”... What is woman? I assure you, I don’t know. I don’t believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and profession open to human skill” (Günes qtd, in 114). Her skills in math and science would be a new avenue for her and would set her up as a different type of prodigy. This is why her confidence is weary of accepting such responsibility; the idea of being a “prodigy” would place her in a similar society as the one from which she escaped.

As Katharine is not ready to build a new self, her libido looks for and accepts the shadows that are cast on her from all directions until she is ready to rebuild her identity. As

Susan Manning explains in her essay “Did Human Character Change?: Representing Women and Fiction from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf,” “The Egyptian queen [Cleopatra] plays all characters, but cannot be caught in any one: the epitome of character as performance both does and does not conceal the anonymity of essence” (34). Although Manning is speaking of a Shakespeare character, Woolf exhibits the same characteristics in Katharine. She dutifully accepts all the characteristics reflected upon her from shadows cast in her direction from lovers, family, and friends to play the parts they have for her. William Rodney, for instance, continually amplifies her literary heritage and makes her his own poetic muse. He loves her lifestyle, which he sees infused with art, literature, music, and culture; even though Katharine confesses that she hasn't even read Shakespeare (*Night and Day* 180). He writes poetry, plays, and essays to gain her approval and believes that his poetry is what attracts her. A fact he contributes to a postscript from one of Katharine's letter, "I like your sonnet very much" (139). Her opinion means so much to him that he is willing to overlook her coldness and faults. After Katharine breaks his heart, Rodney sees the indifferent side of her but reflects it onto himself. He rationalizes, "And yet, when she speaks to me like that! The truth of it is...that I've got such despicable faults that no one could help speaking to me like that. Katharine is quite right...How can I change myself?" (250). Rodney's shadow of Katharine allows her to be an influential part of the literary society she should represent. She believes connecting with Rodney will save her from facing the disappointed ghost of her grandfather, but this relationship is just as stifling.

Where Rodney shrouds Katharine in a shadow of poetic muse, her family gives her the more subdued shadows of sensibility and naivety. Katharine personifies a capable young woman who acts as an ambassador between the old and young, in and outside the creative family realm (*Night and Day* 216). Her aunts treat her as an equal as they discuss family problems with her, as

her father refuses to get involved and her mother is too artistically sensitive to handle such disputes; while her cousins use her knowledge of the older generation to obtain support for their eccentric lifestyles. As a key element in the family, Katharine is respected and adored. However, her shadow changes to one of naivety when she breaks conventions by helping Rodney woo Cassandra. As her Aunt Celia explains, "We all know how good you are—how unselfish—how you sacrifice yourself to others. But you've been too unselfish, Katharine. You have made Cassandra happy, and she has taken advantage of your goodness" (428). This assumption is quite the opposite since Katharine is the one encouraging Cassandra to step out with her finance. As Katharine refuses to speak to Cassandra or allow anyone else to criticize her manner, her aunts confuse her silence with naivety, they go over her head and speak to her father about the affair. His involvement forces Katharine to step outside of her shadow, but her parents don't look for a change in her. Therefore, they don't see one. Her silence brings back the shadows when she announces her engagement to Ralph and faces her father's disappointment. Ann-Marie Priest sums up the family's view of Katharine by explaining that "Her connections with others, their thoughts of her, their namings of her, call back to her self hem her in, re-inscribe the boundaries of an identity that is alien and cumbersome to her. She wants to cast them off—to move, literally, beyond representation" (68). In the instance of her family, Priest is right. Katharine cares and respects her family, but their expectation and their perception of her as a sensible and naive young woman projects a magnificent shadow upon her that is not easy to push off.

I believe this is why Mary's shadows are different for Katharine. Mary tends to place many shadows upon Katharine, all in which encompass everything she admires in the intellectual female sex (*Night and Day* 176). Unlike the other characters, Katharine is curious about Mary's shadows and what they entail; after all, Katharine spends most of the novel just showing up

uninvited to visit Mary. Miss Hilbrey's visits are quite acceptable to Mary as she represents a female that is in complete control and yet inaccessible to the world where Mary lives. As Mary observes, "Katharine might have been seated in her own drawing-room, controlling a situation which presented no sort of difficulty to her trained mind" (178). Katharine's polished manners and her ability to react to any situation shows a feminine power, which Mary sets up as a gulf between them and their places within society—a society that I believe Mary wants to be a part of, but not one she is willing to give up her independence for, which Katharine admires.

Mary tries continually to break into Katharine's confidence, but she can never accomplish this feat, as Katharine is vulnerable and cannot adapt to an unsecured feminist world. However, in her desire to find Ralph, Katharine slips and Mary does see something of her lost ego. At that moment, Mary sees herself, the self that was in love with Ralph and ultimately destroyed by her realization of his feelings:

Mary began to fix her mind, in sympathy, at first, and later in forgetfulness of her companion, upon a point in front of them. She imagined a point distant as a low star upon the horizon of the dark. There for her too, for them both, was the goal for which they were striving, and the end for the ardours of their spirits was the same: but where it was, or what it was, or why she felt convinced that they were united in search of it, as they drove swiftly down the streets of London side by side, she could not have said (475).

This unidentified goal finally gives Mary a connection with Katharine, but unlike Katharine, she can see this journey for what it is. Mary will lose Ralph, but she will gain a great deal of strength by seeing Katharine for who she is, someone a lot like her former self. As this new apparition settles upon Katharine, it severs the tie between these two women, as their apparent social ambitions collude.

Ralph Denham takes a very different approach with Katharine and projects dreams and visions upon her to place her comfortably in his own social world. As a middle-class clerk in a law firm, he doesn't have any hope of winning the heart of Katharine, but his aspirations dismiss such thoughts. He spends hours in his room imagining conversations with her, and so when they meet he is continually schooling her to fit his vision. As Katharine tells Rodney, "Mr Denham seems to think it his mission to lecture me, though I hardly know him" (*Night and Day* 65). These lectures lead Ralph to catch glimpses of Katharine that feed his imagination. As he relates during a visit with her "his dream of Katharine possessed him...He glanced about him with bewilderment at finding himself among her chairs and tables; they were solid...and yet they were unreal; the atmosphere was that of a dream" (149). Even in her presence, he can't tell the difference between the real Katharine or his imagined one, to him they are the same.

Feeling an intimate connection with this lonely man, Katharine tries to burst the dream he places over her, but it doesn't work. Both these characters struggle with finding her a secure place, and finally, just accept their disconnection with each other's inner worlds. As Woolf explains, "Moments, fragments, a second of vision, and then the flying waters, the winds dissipating and dissolving...From the heart of his darkness he spoke his thanksgiving; from a region as far, as hidden, she answered him" (534). At this moment, Katharine abandons her identity and fully embraces her id (fantasy world). Thus releasing her from ever having to accept a new outer world. The death of the ego for Katharine would appear to be a permanent condition, since instead of rejecting the limitations offered to a woman of her lost social class, she embraces them. Freud explains that such a retreat back to the lost-object would make one detached mentally and emotionally from outside reality, which is what we experience at the end of novel when both Katharine and Ralph loosen their hands and simply utter, "good night" accepting the

social regularity to an emotional embrace (535). Melancholia triumphs and we watch as another of Woolf's feminine characters embrace oblivion.

Critics from E. M. Forester to Suzanne Raitt all describe Woolf's second novel *Night and Day* as a failed narrative. Woolf herself admitted that "Bad as the book is, it composed my mind, and I think taught me certain elements of composition which I should not have had the patience to learn had I been in full flush of health always" (Raitt "Virginia Woolf's Early Novels" qtd. in 38). And although Katharine fails to gain a new ego at the end of the novel, I don't believe the same applies to Virginia Woolf. Katharine taught Woolf a lot about human nature and thought in the four years she spent crafting her story. Katharine's experience with melancholia and her use to protect her imagination with illusions of identity were for Woolf a therapeutic exercise to do the same in her professional life.

Virginia Woolf's knowledge of writing traps her within the world of the Edwardian and Georgian styles of narration and her ghosts and shadows were Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy, Forster, Lawrence, and Strachey, the very men who crafted these styles. King expresses a similar observation in Woolf's biography when he suggests Woolf wanted *Night and Day* "to best her three male rivals [Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy] at their own game" (255). Unlike Katharine, Woolf realizes she couldn't sustain these illusions, because their shadows didn't lead to a new world of self-discovery, but rather encompassed her in a world of incompleteness. Suzanne Raitt observed, "The sadness of *Night and Day*...was that it did, in spite of its evasiveness, acknowledge the inadequacy of old formulas without suggesting anything to put in its place" (intro xvi). For Woolf, *Night and Day* is her descent into a melancholic uncertainty and the death of her literary ego.

Virginia Woolf describes her death of ego in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown"

when she enters the conversation about modern fiction with Arnold Bennett. While examining the ideals of composition that Bennett believes makes great novelists, Woolf states “[past novelists] have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death” (“Mr. Bennett” 126). Recognizing the loss of composition and the realization that she had outgrown her former tools of the trade must have scared, frustrated, and exhilarated Virginia Woolf. Now was the moment that she could cast aside the ghosts of past patriarchal narratives and move toward a new literary voice.

Her first act of change was to move the focus of character narrative from the external to the internal. In her essay entitled “Modern Fiction” published *a few days after* submitting *Night and Day* to the publisher, Woolf points out the biggest omission in stylistic narration with the development of character:

[the novelist] has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer ‘this’ but ‘that’: out of ‘that’ alone must he construct his work. For moderns ‘that’, the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology... ‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of the brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss (162, 164).

In this single observation, Woolf redefines Arnold Bennett’s concept of character for the next generation of writers and even suggest a larger look into the subconscious mind from a Freudian perspective. As she explains in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” we are no longer represented by the things that we acquire, we are minds that need exploration and understanding in every basic form (15). With this manifesto in hand, Woolf surpasses Katharine, she found a replacement for

her stifled narrative voice and is ready to explore something new. In my opinion, *Night and Day* secures redemption for Virginia Woolf and gives her the strength to cast off the most smothering shadows of her mother, father, much of her past, and her own sexuality.

In the opening of her essay, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” Woolf made the following observation about herself and her writing, “It seems to me possible, perhaps desirable, that I may be the only person in this room who has committed the folly of writing, trying to write, or failing to write, a novel” (3). It is not surprising that she felt this way. Critics hailed her latest novel as a complete failure to capture the voice of the day and she had no argument against their opinion. She conducts an experiment to understand life through a melancholic lens, which eventually destroys her second heroine. However, Katharine’s oblivion was not a complete loss, the death of her ego gave rise to a new concept of the human character and modern fiction for Virginia Woolf. A new fiction that would give voice to Clara Durrant, Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, Orlando, Bernard, Susan, Louis, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and the Olivers and would “create an on going dialogue about the relations between thought, art, and life” (Briggs). Virginia Woolf’s declaration that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” was significantly telling of her journey as an author, and severs her from the need of literary shadows forever (“Mr. Bennett” 4).

Bibliography

- Briggs, Julia. "Virginia Woolf meets Sigmund Freud." Charleston Festival, 2006. Address.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. Vol XIV. London, Hogarth Press, n.d. Web. 30 Nov. 2015.
- Günes, Ali. "From Self-Sacrifice to Self-Awareness: A View of the New Woman in Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*." *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*. 18.2 (1982): 109-123. Web.
- King, James. *Virginia Woolf*. New York: Norton, 1994. Print.
- Manning, Susan. "Did Human Character Change?: Representing Women and Fiction from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf." *Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*. 11.1 (2013): 29-52. *Project Muse*. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.
- Priest, Ann-Marie. "Between Being and Nothingness: The "Astonishing Precipice" of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*." *Journal of Modern Literature*. 26.2 (2003): 66-80. ProQuest. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.
- Raitt, Suzanne. Introduction. *Night and Day*. By Virginia Woolf. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. xii-xxvii. Print.
- . "Virginia Woolf's Early Novels: Finding a Voice." *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Susan Sellers. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. 29-48. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*. Ed. Andrew McNellie. London: Hogarth Press, 1984. Print.
- . "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." London: Hogarth Press, 1924. Print.
- . *Night and Day*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.