

FINDING "BEING" THROUGH "NON-BEING"

Rachelle Wander

In an ever-expanding world, there are numerous ways in which to define identity. Writing is one form that serves as a method to express artistically a personal perception and self understanding, mostly in the form of autobiography. But what is the most accurate way in which one can present one's identity? Through the exploration of modernist writer Virginia Woolf's autobiography, *Moments of Being*, I examine one woman's method of identity expression in order to better understand not only how one defines herself, but also how her concepts connect to everyday experiences in my own life. Through an exemplary presentation of her own life and work, Woolf's unique style of subjectivity suggests an atypical autobiographical construction. She states her beliefs about what shapes meaning to life and how to discover the meaning. These discoveries prelude her reasons for recounting the specific experiences she incorporates into her works. Through her endeavor to create meaning to her life, Woolf explores her identity by creating a pattern between those moments that left powerful impacts upon her and those moments that connected one crucial incident to the next. By synthesizing daily life with potent events and past with present, Woolf creates her identity in a holistic fashion that encompasses not only her own self, but all those people and events that somehow unite within her life. Woolf's concepts on her own existence and identity formation act as an archetype to anyone who seeks self-affirmation.

British novelist Virginia Woolf exemplifies her self-comprehension in her autobiography *Moments of Being*. Presented as a compilation of three separate sections (the last one being three accounts within a single chapter), and written during various stages of her life, Woolf reveals a solid self-perception in her ability to construct her past and understand how it affects her present. Posthumously, Woolf's husband, Leonard Woolf, and her editor Jeanne Schulkind composed this collection of Woolf's personal writing. Woolf wrote the first section, "Reminiscences," early in her career and intended the passage as a letter to her unborn niece. The last section, "The Memoir Club Contributions," written during the height of her literary maturity, contains three separate anecdotes designed to be read aloud to the intimate group of writers that once formed this exclusive club. Woolf created the main body of the text, "A Sketch of the Past," during the last few years of her life. Notably, Woolf begins

and ends her career as an autobiographer, a fact that illustrates her own obsession for self-understanding as well as being a product of an autobiographical era (Albright 1). It also illustrates Woolf's repeated effort to retrieve her past and the pattern that helps to grasp her present.

In order to appreciate Woolf's abstract autobiographical writing, I must explore her framework for identity apprehension. In "A Sketch of the Past," directly after Woolf introduces herself through several early childhood memories, she delves into what she calls her "own psychology" (70). Her "psychology" is a breakdown of a person's life into two distinct classifications: "Moments of Being" and "moments of non-being" (70). She describes the more numerous moments of "non-being" as "cotton wool" or the day-to-day activities of life, such as eating, sleeping or conversing; she describes "being" as moments of "sudden violent shock[s]" or the anti-thesis to "cotton wool." (71). Woolf elaborates on the power of "being" moments by explaining that they are a "blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order ; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances" (72). Therefore, these moments of "being" override those of "non-being"; they strive to apply meaning to life. In Woolf's case, the only way to achieve a sense of these "shocks" is to write about them. Perhaps the most important concept in understanding Woolf's identity is her *need* to write in order to form it. Woolf shows this by noting,

It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what says and does; one is living in relation to certain background rods and conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. And this conception affects me everyday. I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes. I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else. (73)

This passage elucidates a desire to use her own recognition of "being" and "non-being" moments to uncover the "pattern" that forms her identity. She confesses that the only way in which she can investigate the pattern is by writing. She believes that the time she spends writing is the time when she is closest to forming her "being." However, after introducing these two discrete types of "moments" she barely mentions them again throughout her project. This lack of actual reference between

each experience and type of moment is essential to conceptualizing how Woolf employs an abstract method of writing in order to connect each recount to a type of moment. The acknowledgement that the two forms of moments exist is the basis for the narrations that follow her concepts on identity. After Woolf establishes how to look for her identity, only then she can freely write to conceptualize it.

Once Woolf starts to write about her life, she discusses feelings, moods, and thoughts from her early childhood. However, as she delves deeper into her life, there is an obvious subtraction of these personal descriptions, as her various relatives and their roles in her life begin to fill her pages. Though her attempt is to “extract a pattern from the cotton wool” (Gindin 324), nonetheless in this venture,

one often feels that something is missing, and that the missing thing is Virginia Woolf. It is as if this vast self attentiveness existed as camouflage and deception as for revelation. In the autobiographical writings, as in the novels, the reader is drenched in impalpable subjectivity, in which the subject is not a definite body or face but a watery medium. It is a kind of autobiography which seems, in mysterious ways, to exclude the author. (Albright 2)

Writer Daniel Albright’s observations of the lack of Virginia Woolf within her actual autobiography also set up her writing technique. This “mysterious” exclusion is due most likely to her belief that a person is made up of many selves, and various moments. Thus, she expresses herself by describing those people and events that molded her into Virginia Woolf. Her elusiveness happens because she masks her identity in the form of others who surrounded her as a child. This exclusion is due to her endeavor to explain her life of “non-being” by describing those who most influenced her developmental years. Those influencers assisted her manufacture of “non-being” moments, and only by identifying the “non-being” or “cotton wool” of her childhood can she recognize her “being.” Like theorist Nancy Chodorow explains, “a girl continues to experience herself as involved in issues of merging and separation, and in attachment characterized by primary identification and the fusion of identification and object choice” (Friedman 83). Although she seeks to identify with and separate from other family members besides her mother, as Chodorow’s concepts implies, this idea holds true to Woolf’s project. By describing her family and those that affected her most during her childhood, she not only attempts to “merge” and “separate” from them in order to grasp who Virginia is and how she

became Virginia, but also, as literary critic James Gindin points out, to attain the pattern of “being” and “non-being” within her recounts of each family member.

Instead of describing how she acted and reacted towards her family, Woolf only discusses how her family acted towards her in order to show the powerful influence those close to her had on shaping her person. For example, her half-sister, Stella, played a major part in her upbringing, especially in building confidence and love. Woolf remembers, “And she laughed, tenderly, very gently, and kissed me and said, ‘Oh lots of people are in love as we are. You and Nessa will be one day . . . You must expect people to look at you both’” (105). Likewise, her beloved sister, Vanessa, acted the role as a confidant and vice versa. Woolf writes, “And when [Vanessa] won the prize at her drawing school, she hardly knew, so shy was she, at the recognition of a secret, how to tell me, in order that I might repeat the news at home” (30). As a source for academic knowledge and the main influence in her interest in Greek culture, Woolf’s brother, Thoby often told her stories from his university texts as well as about his friends and the world outside of her sheltered existence she had been forced to endure as a child and adolescent. All three of these family members acted positively toward Woolf as their devotion to her fulfilled her need for love and affection essential in building a strong identity.

Notably, Woolf’s description of each family member focuses on childhood events. Because none of the three writings ever discuss her life past the age of twenty-two, it is clear that Woolf remains focused on understanding her childhood in order to face her future, and possibly death (Albright 1). Not only is this childhood fixation evident in the events she chose to discuss, but in her earliest recollected memory as well. Her first memory recalls one morning, while lying half asleep as a toddler in the nursery at her summer home and hearing the sea waves break, how she sees the early morning light pass through the yellow blind, and hears the wind drag an acorn across the sill. It is a memory of “pure ecstasy” (Woolf 65). Woolf writes, “in fact it is the most important of all my memories” because “if life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory” (64). Used as an attempt to understand the basis of her identity, this memory becomes the “foundation of her existence” as she returns to it again and again throughout this section (Albright 9). Since Woolf commences with her first memory, she captures the initial steps toward identity formation. Then, she compares this first memory of lying in the nursery at St. Ives one summer morning to

“lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow” (Woolf 65). Woolf’s comparison of herself in a pre-natal state and her first memory shows her belief that this memory was her first moment of “being,” her conception. The connection between this first memory and feeling as if she were in a womb-like bubble only emphasizes the base at which she starts her journey of childhood comprehension. Albright explains, “many of the passages in the diary and in the novels in which there is exultation, self-expansion, a sense of merging with the cosmos, seem to appeal to this primal memory” (9). Throughout “A Sketch of the Past,” any time Woolf focuses on self exploration she seems to recall her first memory, her foundation of “being.” Because Woolf’s first moment of “being” occurs when she was a toddler, she could not understand the significance of the moment until reaching a more mature age, and possibly only while writing. It is not until years later, as a young child, while playing amongst the garden at St. Ives and observing a single flower does she have an initial understanding of something evocative happening. Although she had to “put [the idea] away as being likely to be very useful to [her] later,” Woolf’s vision of the flower forced her to realize “that is the whole” (71). In other words, that image “shocked” her into an understanding, which caused her to be aware that there is a broader vision to life beyond her own. Here she realizes a moment of “being,” and begins to make concrete this abstract feeling of a union between herself and the world at large. This realization is important for her to appreciate when each of these “being” moments occur in her life as she reflects upon her past. Only as she reaches maturity can Woolf pinpoint the pattern in past “being” moments. It is her hindsight that makes it possible for her to better understand her past self and subsequently to be able to acknowledge any future moments of “being.” By realizing these moments existed in her childhood gives meaning to her life as an adult. The connection between these moments and the world at large allows Woolf to establish not only her role in the world, but also the role the world has on her identity formation.

According to Woolf’s autobiographical methods, time plays an important factor in the construction of the perceived self. Theorist Rita Felski discusses the structural forms of autobiography in her essay *Autobiography and Postmodernism* using time as a prime example. Felski describes two opposing writing styles: the journal method and the retrospective technique. Felski believes the latter of the approaches concentrates solely on the writers past, as autobiography remains

uninterested in including the present in order to discuss the past. She explains, “the second type of confessional text employs a structure based on retrospective narration and is less obviously concerned with the inclusiveness and depiction of every detail of daily events” (Felski 46). Here, Felski declares that the retrospective form of writing suggests the present has little to inspire the past, as the autobiographer is more concerned with life altering events. However, contrary to Felski’s concept, in Woolf’s autobiography, she uses both the journal and the retrospective style in order to fully understand her identity. Woolf believes that the present (when *exactly* she is doing the writing) creates her past. She determines, “to make [her notes] include the present – at least enough of the present to serve as a platform to stand upon” (75), as “it would be interesting to make the two people, [her] now, [her] then come out in contrast” (75) because “this past is much affected by the present moment” (75). In other words, Woolf acknowledges that her present position (feelings, moods, age, knowledge, etc) profoundly influence her perception of the past, and it is this assessment of her past that aides Woolf in understanding her present identity. Because she repeatedly incorporates the present in diary form before she elaborates on her past, these specific present diary entries represent moments of “being,” which cause her to write about certain moments of “non-being.”

As evidence of her belief that the past influences the present, Woolf admits that while crossing the English Channel one day, she thinks of her passed half-sister, Stella. Consequently, the following month, she proceeds to write about Stella. (Woolf 98). Woolf declares by connecting the present with the past, “that it is it then that [she is] living most fully in the present” (98). That particular moment of “being” forced her to recall those of “non-being.” This gives an example of Woolf creating a pattern, an understanding of her life. Although literary critic James Gindin suggests that Woolf strives to “make the distinction between [moments of “being” and “non-being”] meaningless” (324), Woolf is actually trying to juxtapose them, and by this juxtaposition she emphasizes their opposition. Pairing past and present moments of “being” and “non-being” Woolf again contradicts Felski’s concept on the lack of mingling past and present in order to create meaning. Although Woolf clearly contradicts both Felski’s and Gindin’s claims, that is simply *her* method. By never mentioning those separate moments again throughout her writing allows Woolf to leave her concepts open-ended. How she handles these moments make her Virginia, but how another handles them would make that person’s identity. She concludes,

"For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else" (Woolf 98). Here is she alluding to those foundation memories, her earliest recollected memories. Woolf emphasizes her belief that the foundation of one's present is greatly affected by the past.

As an example of how Woolf juxtaposes moments of "being" and "non-being," she explores the origin of her personal anxieties by describing two similar traumatic experiences. In this case, she depicts the first one as a moment of "being" and the second one as a moment of "non-being." She does this in order to show how similar traumas or experiences can have disparate effects on identity if they occur during isolated stages of life. These traumatic events were sexual assaults by her two older half-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth. Woolf's steady writing technique reveals little qualms in retelling and sharing her past horrific experiences, as she understands that they were simply in the past, and that these experiences happened *to* her, not because of her. (Albright 10). Woolf believes the first abuse by Gerald Duckworth to be a moment of "being" because she recounts the experience early in "A Sketch of the Past" adjacent to other primary, yet powerful moments of "being." Woolf remembers thinking, "how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts . . . I remember resenting it, disliking it" (69). Her serious tone and morbid depiction of the event reveals the momentous impact this moment of "being" had upon her. The second abuse by her other half-brother, George Duckworth, occurs much later in her life, at a time when a girl "enters Society." By taking on an air of dark parody, Woolf attempts to almost comically represent the abuse, which causes the moment to be a form of "cotton wool." Gindin believes Woolf attempts to write such traumatic instances in a comical way because,

She knew well the fright and the difficulty, for her, in trying to make art out of a direct confrontation with 'non-being,' with the actual material of her experience, how often she had to reduce that material to something close to parody to prevent herself from being overwhelmed by it. (324)

In Woolf's search for making moments of "non-being" into art, she must handle even the most traumatic of incidents in any way that she can best understand them. Woolf's sarcastic tone comments upon her community's twisted view on how caring and supportive George Duckworth was for his pitied sisters and thus shows the

absurdity of the entire episode. Woolf remarks, "Yes, the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also" (177). The comical interpretation of her abuse clearly shows how it became a moment of "non-being" because, as it seems to mirror the initial abuse, the damage had already been done to her. Gerald's sexual abuse had already formed a moment of "being," and therefore any such repetitious instances become moments of "non-being." The latter abuse was merely an extension of the former. Her depiction of the second abuse by George as a "non-being" moment exemplifies her belief that "the present when backed by the past" alters the impacts of both events when examined in retrospect. The alteration occurs in her tone. There is an obvious ease in tone when Woolf explains how George abused her compared to the intensity and darkness of tone when Gerald first defiles her. Although she wrote about George abusing her first, by covering the incident with a comical spin, it demonstrates Woolf's attempt to ease the suffocation of the event "pressing so close [to her she] can feel nothing else." Later in her life, when recounting her abuse by Gerald, Woolf's description of the episode shows how clearly it "shocked" her emotionally. Essentially, Woolf discovers that the first abuse diminished the intensity from and helped in her coping with the second abuse due to the fact that it was a reoccurrence.

Ultimately, Virginia Woolf's *Moment of Being* demonstrates a unique method to identity formation. Instead of simply retelling her past and past experiences, she goes beyond the conventional style of autobiography by establishing a position on how to find personal meaning to her own existence, and then following through with her ideas. Because of Woolf's unique style, her writing, specifically autobiography, became a form of art to grasp her self-perception. Just as a painter uses the brush stroke to form his expression; a sculpture his hands; a photographer his lens, Woolf uses words to establish her own substance. She connects moments of "being" with "non-being" like an architect connects the lines of walls on a building. She searches for patterns in her life like a painter forms color patterns in his painting. Perhaps, Woolf has found the best method for identity interpretation. As literary critic, Jean-Paul Sartre believes,

One does not paint meaning; one does not put them to music; on the other hand, the writer deals with meaning . . . the writer can guide you and, if he describes a hovel, make it seem the symbol of social injustice

and provoke your indignation. The painter is mute. He presents you with *a* hovel, that is all. The only true art form is writing. (27-28)

Words can express the absolute emotion, opinion, appearance, understanding, and knowledge to a specific point. Words are a particularly communicative form of art that can so be styled as to eliminate excess malleability by any observer. And so, the autobiography becomes the key element in elucidating identity. This writing is an art because it possesses forms from which to chose and create. Technique illustrates the soul. The arrangement of words on a page becomes just as important as lines forming figures in a painting. It is important to understand that it is not necessarily what the words mean, but how they are placed in context to its neighboring words and expressions. Because style and content can be critiqued, the elegance of syntax becomes the goal for the writer. Words become the paint and style becomes the picture. Woolf's sense of syntax and style create her individual and unique self to the world. She writes free of space, time, and approval to describe her identity.

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COMMENTARY: FINDING "BEING" THROUGH "NON-BEING"

Dixita Patel

Identity plays a critical role in perceiving the self and its relationship to the outside world. Whether it be exploring past experiences to highlight what was the most significant to the individual's life, one's quest for identity is the way to comprehending how worthwhile life can be. In her essay "Finding 'Being' Through 'Non-Being,'" Rachelle Wander explores the depth of Virginia Woolf's persona. Wander through her analysis of Woolf provides the reader with an insight into how exactly the experiences of the past, specifically the moments of "being" and "non-being" has shaped Woolf's character presently and how only by discovering her past can she understand how it affects the present.

Particularly, the discussion of what differentiates a moment of "being" from a moment of "non-being" is an engaging project because it made me contemplate whether anyone really acknowledges the everyday experiences, such as eating or sleeping in defining the more momentous experiences. Everyone undergoes the daily rituals of life but do they consider the impact such experiences can have in understanding the moments of "sudden violent shock" (Wander 2). The notion to understand the memorable moments through the day-by-day moments is unique to what others have been conditioned to learn and expect.

Wander's use of Nancy Chodorow's theory of "merging and separation" (4) demonstrates the writer's ability to engage in critical analysis and connective thinking. Understanding Woolf's attempts to "merge" and "separate" from her family in order to understand who molded her into Virginia Woolf is essential to the argument. However, Wander does not address how and why Virginia "masks her identity in the form of others who surrounded her as a child" (4). Did this vast self-attentiveness exist as "camouflage and deception as for revelation?" (4) Wander also mentions the word "revelation" at other key points throughout the essay but does not analyze its importance in comprehending identity formation.

The author incorporates the analysis and theories of several scholars to reinforce the argument, creating strong textual support and cohesive paragraphs. However, the argument seems to shift its focus. It is not absolutely clear as to whether or not the purpose of the work is to prove that true identity formation can only be established after realizing the "non-being" is necessary for acknowledging the "being" or is the focus on "how Woolf's concepts on her own existence and

identity formation act as an archetype to anyone who seeks self-affirmation" (Wander 1). Moreover, the author only attempts to discuss that particular idea in the introduction and does not reflect back to it within the essay. The role identity plays in achieving self-affirmation would be an interesting idea to explore in the paper.

When Wander elaborates on Woolf's moment of "being," specifically her conception, she does not discuss what moment of "non-being" led her to realize the moment of "being," namely the significance of her conception, which is fundamental to her argument. Would Virginia need to experience a moment of "non-being" necessarily to acknowledge her conception, "which makes concrete this abstract feeling of a union between herself and the world at large?" (Wander 7)

Furthermore, while Wander cites sources effectively to reinforce her claim, she does not engage the sources in a dialogue as to create moments of analysis. For instance, in order to complicate the argument, "Felski's concept on the lack of a mingling past and present in order to create meaning, should be viewed in lieu of Chodorow's concept of "merging and separation" (Wander 9). Engaging the sources in a dialogue would strengthen the author's argument and create more focus.

Wander's analysis of the juxtaposition of Woolf's moments of "being" and "non-being" as representative of her personal identity, is undeniably the strongest aspect of her paper because she adroitly engages and critiques the authors to formulate her own ideas of Woolf's experiences. Not only does Wander validate her claim but furthermore challenges the reader to ponder why we as humans need to explore the past, both the momentous and insignificant experiences, only to better understand ourselves and the place we hold in society and the world at large.

RESPONSE

Rachelle Wander

My editor, Dixita Patel, has made some vital points in revising my paper that has allowed me not only to streamline my project, but also to push me into critically rethinking many of my ideas. Particular useful points are those she made on my lack of explanation on certain points, such as my thesis, Woolf's technique of disguising her identity in others, and the meaning behind Woolf's juxtaposing "being" with "non-being." Patel has forced me to look closely at my project to find instances where I convolute my words or shift my focus.

However, there are times when I feel as if Patel did not quite grasp my meanings, which only pushed me into revising my writing. In the final draft, there were still some concepts Patel did not seem to read clearly enough. When she discusses my main focus for the paper, she cites two sentences from early on in my project. Patel seemed to think that there is a difference between proving “that true identity formation can only be established after realizing the ‘non-being’ is necessary for acknowledging the ‘being’”(Patel 2) and “‘how Woolf’s concepts on her own existence and identity formation act as an archetype to anyone who seeks self-affirmation’ (Wander 1)” (Patel 2). The former is just another way of explaining the latter. Woolf’s concept that identity formation happens after determining the “being” and the “non-being” act as a paradigm for those who seek self affirmation. Also, when Patel questions how I show the way Woolf “masks her identity in the form of others” (Wander 4), I illustrate this point in the following paragraphs by explaining that “Woolf only discusses how her family acted towards her in order to show the powerful influence those close to her had on shaping her person” (Wander 5). Then, I supply a few examples of key influencers, Stella, Vanessa, and Thoby, and how they affected Woolf’s identity.

As for Patel’s question on what moment of “non-being” led her to realize the “being” is an interesting suggestion and one that would add complexity to my paper. However, that was never addressed in Woolf’s autobiography, so to address it in my paper would have been stretching and twisting Woolf’s words. Furthermore, Patel had other questions about interpreting “being” and “non-being” moments that are subject to change person by person, in my own opinion. Nonetheless, as Patel suggested, I could have used a more dialogic approach to working with the many other authors I chose to cite within my paper. But I was attempting to streamline and create as concise a paper as possible.

Dixita Patel was an effective editor and thoroughly examined and questioned each point I tried to make. Her suggestions and points were actually the best ones anyone has ever given to me about my writing. I thank her for her time and I hope she received as much insight from me as I did from her.