

Exploring Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*



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Introduction

This free course, *Exploring Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts*, is designed to explore the historical context of the final work of Virginia Woolf, one of the most significant modernist writers of the twentieth century. You'll read about the historical context that led to the writing of this novel, which was written during the late 1930s, and published during the Second World War. You'll explore Woolf's views on the role of this novel, and the wider significance of literature and language. As well as reading about the novel, you will read several extracts from it, which will have audio readings accompanying them, and you'll be asked to analyse these extracts, and determine how Woolf achieved her aims by depicting images, memories, and language.

It would be helpful, but not essential, to read *Between the Acts* for this course. Where passages from the novel are used in the course, the page numbers cited correspond to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the text.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A335 Literature in transition: from 1800 to the present](#), and was written by Sue Asbee.

Before you start, if you'd like an introduction to the style of Virginia Woolf's work first, watch this short video from a four part series produced by The Open University, examining the lives, work and influence of women writers:

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify Woolf's ideas about time, memory and identity
- understand the role of innovation and experimentation in prose fiction
- demonstrate a developed ability to read dense poetic prose analytically.

1 Exploring Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

In 1936 Virginia Woolf wrote to her friend T. S. Eliot to thank him for sending her his *Collected Poems*. She said:

I've been lying in an arm chair in front of the fire with your book open, and such radiance rises from the words that I can't get near them....I expect its what the Lit. Sup. critic would call enchantment, incantation – there must be a critic's word: but I'm too sleepy to find it – and so must testify to the fact: I'm held off from understanding by magic.

(Nicolson, 1980, p.29)

Woolf's response to Eliot's poetry, which is often considered 'difficult', is worth keeping in mind when you read her own novels, for they may seem unconventional or unexpected if they are new to you. This course explores the reasons why she wrote as she did. Her letter to Eliot suggests that, certainly at her first reading, she simply allowed the sound qualities of his language to overwhelm her – 'such radiance rises from the words'. She responded to the rhythm, movement and music of his verse rather than struggling to find meaning. 'I'm held off from understanding by magic', she says, suggesting that an inability to understand can sometimes be a virtue rather than something to worry about. That's the spirit you should try to keep in mind if you find Woolf's writing difficult at first.



Figure 1 Virginia Woolf, 1939, colour dye transfer print, 30 × 20 cm. Photo: © Gisèle Freund/IMEC/Fonds MCC.

Virginia Woolf was an essayist, a critic, and biographer. She wrote reviews, letters, diaries and she published nine novels, of which *Between the Acts* (1941) was the last. An earlier novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), has a time span of 18 hours and in *Between the Acts* Woolf set herself a similar framework, 'a June day in 1939' (*Between the Acts*, p.69). The date is important, just weeks before the start of the Second World War, while the focus on a single day allows her to explore how the whole weight of the past relates to the immediacy of the present moment. Through ideas about time and memory, what is 'now' is seen to rest on all that has gone before. The novel focuses on a particular day, and also on a particular location: a small English village community.

Woolf called *Between the Acts* 'Pointz Hall' while she was writing it, the name of the 'middle-sized' (p.6) country house where the Oliver family live. The novel has no main character; instead interest is diffused among generations of that family: Old Bartholomew, his sister Mrs Swithin, his son Giles, Giles's wife Isabella and their small son George. The family's servants, their visitors, Mrs Manresa, her friend William Dodge as well as numerous characters who live in the village all appear in the narrative. Miss La Trobe is the artist in the text; she writes and directs the pageant acted by the villagers on that June day. Nature too plays its part:

The lawn was as flat as the floor of a theatre. The terrace, rising, made a natural stage. The trees barred the stage like pillars. And the human figure was

seen to great advantage against a background of sky. As for the weather, it was turning out, against all expectation, a very fine day. A perfect summer afternoon.

(*Between the Acts*, p.70)

Woolf referred to *Between the Acts* as her 'trip thro' English lit. book' (Bell, 1984, p.329) and it is through the pageant that this really becomes evident. It begins with a small child declaring 'England am I' (p.70) and the scenes that follow establish a national historical and literary identity: Canterbury pilgrims, Elizabeth I, an 18th-century Restoration comedy, and a Victorian picnic party succeed each other, finishing with the present day.

Listen to the following audio, which is a reading of an excerpt from the scene:

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio clip 1.](#)

The pageant works as a device that brings actors and audience, villagers and family together; past and present merge, and an idiosyncratic, very selective kind of history of England is enacted. It is particularly poignant because of the date on which it is takes place. Beneath the surface, the question throughout is: how much longer can this vision of England last?

2 Background of war

The title *Between the Acts* indicates intervals between acts of the pageant but also suggests, even more potently, the period between the First and Second World Wars. Woolf started writing it in 1938 when war with Germany was looming and when her non-fiction, anti-war essay *Three Guineas* had just been published. There she argues passionately for women's education for without it, she says, women are not in a position to think for themselves. Education will mean that they 'can use that mind and will to abolish the inhumanity, the beastliness, the horror, the folly of war' (Black, 2001, p.77). That the Spanish Civil War had a profound effect on her thinking is clear, as she was supportive of socialist and anti-fascist movements. Her nephew Julian Bell went to Spain as an ambulance driver for the Republicans where he was killed in July 1937. As Naomi Black says, the links 'between sexism, war and fascism seem to have become evident to Woolf sometime in the mid-thirties' (Black, 2001, p.xxv).

Woolf and her husband Leonard stored petrol, planning suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning should the country be invaded, for Leonard was Jewish and both were on the Nazis' register for execution. Their London homes in Tavistock Square and Mecklenburgh Square, which housed their Hogarth Press, were bomb damaged; Woolf sorted through the chaos to salvage her diaries. At their country home in Rodmell, Sussex on 2 October 1940 she reports:

a great heavy plunge of bomb under the window.... I said to L.: I don't want to die yet...But they're aiming at the railway and the power works.

(Bell, 1984, p.326)



Figure 2 Bomb damage to 52 Tavistock Square, London, 1941. Photo: Vogue © The Condé Nast Publications Ltd.

Woolf's diaries catalogue the raids and the everyday privations that war imposed while she carried on writing fiction and biography. She observed on 29 May 1940 that 'one can't plan, any more, a long book' (Bell, 1984, p.289) and *Between the Acts* is the shortest of her novels, set just before the outbreak of war.

3 What can prose fiction do?

Woolf was passionately interested in exploring new possibilities for fiction; this is one reason her writing is sometimes considered 'difficult'. Like other modernist writers, she sought new ways of representing life. So where there is no protagonist in *Between the Acts*, there is very little in the way of plot either. She was dissatisfied with the idea of 19th-century realism, asking in 'Modern Fiction' (1919) why we go on 'perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds' (Bradshaw, 2008, p.8). Using an image of slavery which she returns to later in the same essay, she goes on to say that, working within the established convention of novel-writing, the writer:

seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy,

tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccably that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats.

(Bradshaw, 2008, p.8)

In fact elements of comedy, tragedy and even love interest can be found in *Between the Acts*, but the way they are presented owes little to more conventional novels. Instead, as Woolf wrote in a later essay, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' (1927), she thought that novels should dramatize:

some of those influences which play so large a part in life, yet have so far escaped the novelist – the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us in crowds, the obscure terrors and hatreds which come so irrationally in certain places or from certain people, the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine. Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it.

(Woolf, L. ed. (1966-67) *Collected Essays* ii, pp.228–9)

That passage was written long before Woolf conceived of *Between the Acts*, nevertheless it provides an excellent starting point for discussion.

Activity 1

To begin that discussion, please now read these two short paragraphs from the text. How do they demonstrate Woolf's interest in aspects of life she feels have so far 'escaped the novelist'?

Candish paused in the dining-room to move a yellow rose. Yellow, white, carnation, red – he placed them. He loved flowers, and arranging them, and placing the green sword or heart shaped leaf that came, fitly, between them. Queerly he loved them, considering his gambling and drinking. The yellow rose went there. Now all was ready – silver and white, forks and napkins, and in the middle the splashed bowl of variegated roses. So with one last look, he left the dining-room.

(*Between the Acts*, pp.32–3)

This one follows soon after:

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence.

(*Between the Acts*, pp.33–4)

Discussion

'Candish' has not been mentioned in the novel before, and though he reappears (see p.60) he is never 'explained'. You can infer that he is a servant, but the narrator has no interest in placing him: his function is his aesthetic appreciation of colour,

arrangement and order. He is, in one respect, an artist. As you become more familiar with the text as a whole, you may find other associations connected with the empty room of the second paragraph, which may be the same one that Candish has left, but then again may be a different room altogether. Reading the lines out loud will help you to get a sense of the rhythm of the sentences and the patterning of repeated words and sounds. The second sentence ends as the first one began, with emptiness and silence, although mysteriously in the silence, the room sings.

These brief passages of poetic, rhythmic prose have nothing to do with any plot. They may be easily overlooked altogether unless you read with close attention, simply because nothing happens. If novels conventionally have been about the individual in society, what role does an empty room have in such a text? You may begin to form your own ideas about that as you work through the next sections.

4 Genre

What did Woolf believe? She was brought up to have no conventional religious conviction. In her family that was the norm, but elsewhere too there was a general sense of loss of faith, especially after the First World War. As a result, Woolf and other writers like her rejected the kind of third-person narrator who is often also referred to as 'omniscient': god-like and all-knowing. Such a position seemed too authoritative. How realistic is the idea of a plot, where complex lives and events result in tidy and neat endings? Is life really like that? Such questions provide ways of thinking about Woolf's own dissatisfactions with fiction, and help to explain why she constantly sought new ways to express what life is.

Between the Acts has so far been referred to as a 'novel', but the term is a convenience, used for want of a better word. The title of Woolf's essay 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', published in the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1927, demonstrates her intense and continuing interest in change and innovation in writing: 'It may be possible' she says:

that prose is going to take over – has, indeed, already taken over – some of the duties which were once discharged by poetry...and that in ten or fifteen years' times prose will be used for purposes for which prose has never been used before....We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading. And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play.

(Bradshaw, *Selected Essays*, pp. 79–80)

Those last sentences give you some idea of Woolf's preoccupations. There are few things more prosaic than a discussion of a cesspool, which is how *Between the Acts* begins. But the use of repeated motif, of rhythmic and rhyming prose, the incorporation of Miss La Trobe's open-air pageant with dialogue, stage directions and nature in the form of swallows, cows, and the weather all playing random parts, lifts it beyond conventional expectations of what a novel might do.

To take just one of those techniques, motif has always played a part in prose fiction. Dickens for example, writing over a period of time for serialisation, repeated phrases so readers would instantly recall characters, tone and events. Woolf's use of repeated phrases is quite different and has multiple effects. For example, before the pageant begins Mrs Manresa hears 'laughter, down among the bushes' (*Between the Acts*, p.54); later Isabella thinks 'They're getting ready. They're dressing up in the bushes' (p.57). Even in the very last section Mrs Swithin wonders 'The looking-glasses and the voices in the bushes....What did she mean?' (p.192).

Activity 2

There are many other instances and variations of laughter in the bushes in the text, what function do you think such repetitions might serve?

Discussion

One simple answer is that a repeated phrase provides a pattern. In the examples quoted above, three separate characters use the same words, so that might suggest a connection between them. You could come back to this question again later when you have more information, but the idea of pattern and of connection is key to Woolf's thoughts and beliefs.

In her essay 'Sketch of the Past', Woolf describes her beliefs:

That behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

(Schulkind and Lee (eds), 2002, p.85)

The idea that 'we are the thing itself' is at the heart of *Between the Acts*. The laughter in the bushes functions in the text as a way of patterning and structuring it. The word 'motif' describes a repeated musical phrase, and in the absence of plot, she presents instead aesthetic organisation.

Activity 3

Now read the passage below. With the idea that 'we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself' in mind, identify the techniques Woolf employs to convey a sense of unity and life as 'the thing itself'.

The audience was assembling. The music was summoning them. Down the paths, across the lawns they were streaming again. There was Mrs Manresa, with Giles at her side, heading the procession. In taut plump curves her scarf blew round her shoulders. The breeze was rising. She looked, as she crossed the lawn to the strains of the gramophone, goddess-like, buoyant, abundant, her cornucopia running over. Bartholomew, following, blessed the power of the human body to make the earth fruitful. Giles would keep his orbit so long as she weighted him to the earth. She stirred the stagnant pool of his old heart even – where bones lay buried, but

the dragon flies shot and the grass trembled as Mrs Manresa advanced across the lawn to the strains of the gramophone.

Feet crunched the gravel. Voice chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music, wafted from the bushes, is expressive of some inner harmony? 'When we wake' (some were thinking) 'the day breaks with its hard mallet blows.' 'The office' (some were thinking) 'compels disparity. Scattered, shattered, hither thither summoned by the bell. "Ping-ping-ping" that's the phone. "Forward!" "Serving!" – that's the shop.' So we answer to the infernal, agelong and eternal order issued from on high. And obey. 'Working, serving, pushing, striving, earning wages – to be spent – here? Oh dear no. Now? No, by and by. When ears are deaf and the heart is dry.'

Here Cobbet of Cobbs Corner who had stooped – there was a flower – was pressed on by people pushing from behind.

For I hear music, they were saying. Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen. See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue. And the trees with their many-tongued much syllabbling, their green leaves hustle us and shuffle us, and bid us, like the starlings, and the rooks, come together, crowd together, to chatter and make merry while the red cow moves forward and the black cow stands still.

(*Between the Acts*, pp.107–8)

Discussion

Music runs throughout the passage, from the sounds of voices which 'chattered' and feet which 'crunched the gravel' to the rhythm and repetition of 'Scattered, shattered', 'seeing, pushing, striving, earning', which gives shape and coherence to the prose even while the description is of disparity. In the last paragraph, subordinate clauses, adding details of flowers, trees, birds, a group of random people, show that all are connected, 'coming together' in a visual image where even the choreography of the red cow and the black cow conforms to a pattern. Woolf's joyous hyperbolic language, together with music from the gramophone, transforms Mrs Manresa into a goddess with a profound effect on Giles and Bartholomew.

5 Time and continuity

Woolf, declaring that 'certainly and emphatically there is no God' nevertheless values moments of understanding, not epiphanies in a Christian sense, but what she called 'moments of being' (Schulkind and Lee eds., 2002, p.83). Far from dismissing the rest of time as a waste, she embraces the everyday, even the banalities of life: 'The Pharaohs. Dentists. Fish' (*Between the Acts*, p.28) Mrs Swithin says, her mind inconsequentially jumping from one thing to another. After the pageant an unattributed voice in the crowd is heard saying, apropos of nothing: 'There's the dogs, there's the pictures' (p.179). The text is littered with such trivialities, for if indeed the whole world is a work of art, nothing can be excluded and everything deserves to be included.

Activity 4

Between the Acts has no chapter divisions, perhaps as a gesture towards this sense of wholeness and connection, but there are breaks in the text. Read these first few paragraphs from the opening of the book now. How is a sense of time and history established here?

It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool. The county council had promised to bring water to the village, but they hadn't.

Mrs Haines, the wife of the gentleman farmer, a goosefaced woman with eyes protruding as if they saw something to gobble in the gutter, said affectedly: 'What a subject to talk about on a night like this!'

Then there was silence; and a cow coughed; and that led her to say how odd it was, as a child, she had never feared cows, only horses. But, then, as a small child in a perambulator, a great cart-horse had brushed within an inch of her face. Her family, she told the old man in the arm-chair, had lived near Liskeard for many centuries. There were graves in the churchyard to prove it.

A bird chuckled outside. 'A nightingale?' asked Mrs Haines. No, nightingales didn't come so far north. It was a daylight bird, chuckling over the substance and succulence of the day, over worms, snails, grit, even in sleep.

The old man in the arm-chair – Mr Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired – said that the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road. From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars.

'But don't you remember....' Mrs Haines began. No, not that. Still he did remember – and he was about to tell them what, when there was a sound outside, and Isa, his son's wife, came in with her hair in pigtails.

(*Between the Acts*. pp.3–4)

Discussion

The idea that history is inscribed in the very landscape – visible, significantly, from a 20th-century aeroplane – is one fairly obvious indication of the span of the past: the Britons, Romans, Elizabethans and the Napoleonic Wars have all left their mark. Set against this broad general sweep of time and the past are individuals. Mr Oliver is 'of the Indian Civil Service', which reminds us of more recent history and of British Imperialism. Mrs Haines is the first character to speak in the novel, so it would be reasonable to expect her to develop into a major character. In fact, though she does reappear (p.74), she never speaks again – something you are unlikely to realise at all, or until you have read the whole text. That may suggest something about the unwritten past and those who history has forgotten or overlooked. But while she makes her brief appearance, Mrs Haines is keen to establish her personal history, as her sense of identity is dependent on continuity with the past: her family 'had lived near Liskeard for many centuries. There were the graves in the churchyard to prove it' (p.3). The opening sentence which tells us matter-of-factly of the proposed village cesspool, establishes an important image of ideas about time and continuity which are

developed throughout the text. A phrase from T. S. Eliot's poem 'East Coker', 'dung and death', sums this up aptly. Woolf's cesspool appears on the first page of the earliest draft of 'Pointz Hall' (Leaska, 1983, p.250) which differs radically from the published version, but the cesspool survives to be mentioned four times in the opening pages of *Between the Acts*. Unlikely though it may seem, in Woolf's writing, it is an important image suggesting life and fertility.

More immediate personal history and the importance of memory is also a feature of this passage: 'But don't you remember...' Mrs Haines begins, but does not finish. Mr Oliver interrupts her with a remembrance of his own, but that too is interrupted by his daughter-in-law's appearance. Later he remembers that over sixty years ago 'his mother had given him the works of Byron in that very room' (p.5) – another way in which the past is handed down to the present: from a volume of Romantic poetry, to his Victorian mother, to his recollection in the present moment. Mr Oliver's quotation from Byron's 'She walks in beauty' also makes its own contribution to Woolf's own 'trip thro' English lit.' (Nicolson, 1980, p.329)

Activity 5

Mrs Swithin's favourite reading is H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* (1920). Read the passage below now to determine how Woolf works to capture the present moment, at the same time implying the weight of the past.

But it was summer now. She had been awakened by the birds. How they sang! attacking the dawn like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake. Forced to listen, she had stretched for her favourite reading – an Outline of History – and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest, naturally she jumped as Grace put the tray down and said: 'Good morning, Ma'am.' 'Batty,' Grace called her, as she felt on her face the divided glance that was meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron.

(*Between the Acts*, pp.8–9)

Discussion

So deeply is Mrs Swithin engaged with her reading that prehistory is more present to her than her actual surroundings. Both are simultaneously present. So far removed from reality is she that it took 'five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer' to distinguish the servant Grace from her imagined 'grunting monster'. This difference between clock time ('five seconds') and time as it is experienced ('ever so

much longer') is one example of something which interested Woolf throughout her writing; time and memory are fundamental to ideas about identity throughout her fiction, autobiographical and diary writing. The effects are achieved through her writing style. The passage begins with three short sentences, then moves into one long one, which has multiple subordinate clauses mimicking the way Mrs Swithin's mind works. The third-person narrative intersperses four brief phrases, reminding us that we are following Mrs Swithin's thoughts: 'she understood' is repeated twice, 'she supposed', and 'she thought' punctuate the sentence as her imagination develops the prehistoric scene. At the end of the first paragraph her thought that we are descended from such prehistoric creatures is punctuated by her action of jerking the window open – another way in which the present moment is imposed on Mrs Swithin's imaginative engagement with the past. The long, flowing, heavily punctuated sentence mimics her thought patterns.

Mrs Swithin's great-nephew George has a similar, more frightening moment of perception. A very small boy, grubbing about in the earth at roots and grass, he 'held a flower complete'. But suddenly 'there was a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair' which 'rushed between him and the flower. Up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms' (pp.10–11). In this instance the eyeless monster is his grandfather with a rolled-up newspaper at his face, oblivious to the idea that he might frighten, rather than amuse the child. Mrs Swithin and George are not alone in seeing one thing but failing at first to recognise it. Our experience of the world is subjective, our perception not fixed or necessarily immediate, and our brains cannot always process visual stimuli immediately. Woolf's writing expresses her age's interest in psychology and ways in which our minds work.

6 Woolf and language

In 1937 Woolf gave a series of talks on BBC radio called *Words Fail Me*. Part of this series, *Craftsmanship* (Bradshaw, p.85), was broadcast on 29 April 1937. She takes as her starting point the surprising idea that 'words are not useful'. A sign on the London Underground provides her first example with the words 'Passing Russell Square':

...on an illuminated signboard, are the words "Passing Russell Square." We look at those words; we repeat them; we try to impress that useful fact upon our minds; the next train will pass Russell Square. We say over and over again as we pace, 'Passing Russell Square, passing Russell Square'. And then as we say them, the words shuffle and change, and we find ourselves saying 'Passing away saith the world, passing away....The leaves decay and fall....' And then we wake up and find ourselves at King's Cross.

(Bradshaw, 2008, p.85)

Her point is that the more one repeats the words, the more divorced they become from any meaning they are intended to convey. A valid response to that apparently simple statement 'Passing Russell Square' would be to wonder whether it meant that the next

train would stop at, or go straight past Russell Square, but in Woolf's case the words recall other associations: 'The leaves decay and fall' rewrites Tennyson's 'the woods decay and fall' from his poem 'Tithonus'. 'Passing away, Saith the World' is the title of a poem by Christina Rossetti (1830–94). Later in the essay Woolf returns to this phrase:

Take the simple sentence 'Passing Russell Square'. That proved useless because besides the surface meaning it contained so many sunken meanings. The 'passing' suggested the transiency of things, the passing of time and the changes of human life. Then the word 'Russell' suggested the rustling of leaves and the skirt on a polished floor; also the ducal house of Bedford and half the history of England. Finally the word 'Square' brings in the sight, the shape of an actual square combined with some visual suggestion of the stark angularity of stucco.

(Bradshaw, 2008, p.87)

Words are 'useless' because they are so open to interpretation. Woolf concludes, 'one sentence of the simplest kind rouses the imagination, the memory, the eye and the ear – all combine in reading it' (Bradshaw, 2008, p.87). In spite of the word 'useless' it is clear that in her improvisation of associations of what 'Passing Russell Square' conjures up for her, Woolf is also celebrating the multivalence of language.

Sometimes Woolf celebrates the slipperiness of language; sometimes it brings her to despair because far from enabling communication, it can forge barriers and failures of understanding. 'Words without meaning – wonderful words', Miss La Trobe thinks to herself towards the end of the novel as she struggles to find the first words of her next production: but 'the words escaped her' (*Between the Acts*, p.189). This contradictory impulse runs throughout *Between the Acts*, as dialogue between Bartholomew, Mrs Swithin, Mrs Manresa, Isa and William Dodge illustrates.

Activity 6

Read the passage below now. To what extent do the characters communicate with each other?

'Since you're interested in pictures,' said Bartholomew, turning to his silent guest, 'why, tell me, are we, as a race, so incurious, irresponsible and insensitive' – the champagne had given him a flow of unusual three-decker words – 'to that noble art, whereas, Mrs Manresa, if she'll allow me my old man's liberty, has her Shakespeare by heart?'

'Shakespeare by heart!' Mrs Manresa protested. She struck an attitude. 'To be or not to be, that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler ...Go on!' she nudged Giles, who sat next to her.

'Fade far away and quite forget what thou amongst the leaves hast never known...' Isa supplied the first words that came into her head by way of helping her husband out of his daily difficulty.

'The weariness, the torture, and the fret...' William Dodge added, burying the end of his cigarette in a grave between two stones.

'There!' Bartholomew exclaimed, cocking his forefinger aloft. 'That proves it! What springs touched, what secret drawer displays its treasures, if I say' – he raised more fingers – 'Reynolds! Constable! Crome!'

'Why called "Old"?' Mrs Manresa thrust in.

'We haven't the words – we haven't the words,' Mrs Swithin protested.

'Behind the eyes; not on the lips; that's all.'

'Thoughts without words,' her brother mused. 'Can that be?'

(*Between the Acts* pp.49–50)

Discussion

One way of assessing the extent – or lack – of communication is to read the word each character speaks without the intervening narrative. It's likely that you will find that although four characters speak, they do not necessarily speak to each other.

Bartholomew declares that the British are 'insensitive' to art, but that Mrs Manresa 'has her Shakespeare by heart'. This seems unlikely as her response is a stock line or so of Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be,' which Giles, remaining silent, cannot or will not continue. His wife Isa covers this with a misquotation from Keats's poem 'To a Nightingale' which William Dodge takes up. This, Bartholomew declares, proves his point, though it's uncertain whether he believes that Isa and William quote from Shakespeare, or if he recognises Keats. Whichever it is, he demonstrates his delight in language: 'What springs touched, what secret drawer displays its treasures'. But his cry: 'Reynolds! Constable! Crome!' elicits no response from the company, only Mrs Manresa who asks, seemingly inconsequentially 'Why called "Old"?' Her association of ideas has jumped ahead of, or past Bartholomew's argument, to query why these painters are referred to as 'Old Masters' – the question remains unanswered because Mrs Swithin protests 'We haven't the words – we haven't the words'. Whether she is responding to Mrs Manresa's question or an association of her own is not clear. 'Behind the eyes; not on the lips; that's all' she continues, which prompts her brother to wonder 'Thoughts without words...Can that be?', another question which is not answered directly, but which the novel as a whole debates and plays with. The assembled company have spoken, but not necessarily to each other.

Isa's quotation from 'To a Nightingale', 'Fade far away and quite forget what thou amongst the leaves hast never known' may be random, but these 'first words that came into her head' may have surfaced because they reveal her feelings about her marriage, even as the narrative explains that they function to help 'her husband out of his daily difficulty', for Giles remains silent when Mrs Manresa prompts him to complete her quotation. Unprompted, William Dodge completes Isa's: 'The weariness, the torture, and the fret...' His action of 'burying the end of his cigarette in a grave between two stones' as he speaks emphasises the hopelessness of his feelings, as does the phrase he quotes, as if he is trying to bury that too. Using someone else's words, these two characters express in public their private feelings of longing and loss, but none of the company recognises it. Words in this instance are articulated in order to convey and to conceal.

On close examination what seems to be a page of inconsequential chatter reveals a great deal about individual characters, as well as Woolf's own interests. Because there are so many references to words, they become self-referential within the text – for example, a simple comment from Mrs Manresa, when she claims that she cannot 'put two words together' (*Between the Acts*, p.56) has much wider reverberations when one of the themes of the novel is Miss La Trobe's struggle with words and meanings as a writer, which in turn reflect Woolf's own struggle and indeed despair at her feelings that what she

writes falls far short of her conception. It is clear from the passages analysed above that words rarely have a single or transparent meaning.

The strained relationship between Isa and her husband Giles is, paradoxically, most often expressed through silence. In general Giles rarely responds to conversational openings, but the greatest silences exist between him and Isa. He can despise William Dodge and Mrs Parker, 'But not Isa – not his wife. She had not spoken to him, not one word. Nor looked at him either' (p.100). Giles is alone when he sees and stamps the life out of perhaps the most shocking image in *Between the Acts*, of a 'monstrous inversion': a snake 'unable to swallow [a] toad ... unable to die' (p.89).

Listen to the following audio, which is a reading of the scene:

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio clip 2.](#)

Others react differently to the unexplained blood on Giles's white tennis shoes: "No," said Isa, as plainly as words could say it. "I don't admire you," but she does not use words. She looks 'not at his face, but at his feet. "Silly little boy, with blood on his boots."' (p.100). This poses the question, who is the perceiver? Is this how Giles interprets his wife's look, or is Isa expressing her own contempt? The communication is conveyed by a look, not language. Typically, Mrs Manresa assumes the bloodstained shoes are a compliment to her: 'Vaguely some sense that he had proved his valour for her admiration flattered her.... Taking him in tow, she felt: I am the Queen, he my hero, my sulky hero.' (p.96). There is no indication that Giles is aware of her feelings but before long, in her company he does look down at his shoes, and smiles (p.97).

7 Imagery and identity

In *Between the Acts* Woolf delights in playing with the idea that a single name could possibly sum up a person. Mrs Swithin is also known as Batty (*Between the Acts*, p.8), Cindy, Sindy, Lucy (p.19) and 'Old Flimsey' (p.24), while the name 'Swithin' itself suggests opposites, fair weather and rain, as the old saying goes: 'St Swithin's day if thou dost rain/ For forty days it will remain./St Swithin's day if thou be fair/For forty days 'twill rain nae mare'. "And which will it be?" Mrs Swithin continued. "Wet or fine?" (p.20). The boy who delivers the fish has a name which was 'in the Domesday book' (p.29), but we never learn what it is. The cook is Mrs Sands, called 'by old friends, Trixie' (p.29); the cat is Sung-Yen in the drawing room, but Sunny in the kitchen. Similarly Mr Oliver is Bart to his sister, 'The Master' in the drawing room and 'Bartie' in the kitchen. "Never play", her mother used to say, "on people's names" (p.30) thinks Mrs Swithin, but that is exactly what Woolf does. Our identities are intimately associated with our names, but with so many different versions used by different people in different circumstances, how effective are they at summing up or pinning that identity down? Or is Woolf suggesting that identity constantly changes, and is far too elusive to be summed up by one single name?

In her essay 'Street Haunting', published in 1927, ten years before Woolf started work on *Between the Acts*, she asks a related question about identity:

Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self

neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience' sake a man must be a whole.

(Bradshaw, 2008, p.182)

The notion of an integrated sense of self is only a 'convenience', not the 'true self'. In *Between the Acts*, Isa, a shortened version of Isabella, is also Mrs Giles Oliver, the formal title indicating both her marital status and her husband. As she brushes her hair standing in front of the 'three-folded mirror' Isa can see 'three separate versions' of herself (p.12). Perhaps because of the tension between her and her husband, her eyes reflected in the mirror tell her that she is 'In love' with the 'romantic gentleman farmer', Rupert Haines (p.4) who had given her 'a cup of tea at a tennis party; handed her once, a racquet' (pp.4, 13, 187). At the same time 'on the washstand, on the dressing table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes' (p.13) she sees her love for her husband:

'The father of my children' she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table. But what feeling was it that stirred in her now when above the looking glass, out of doors, she saw coming across the lawn the perambulator; two nurses; and her little boy George, lagging behind?

(*Between the Acts*, p.13)

The mirror/glass/window imagery recurs time and again with numerous variations on the theme of 'reflection' in the pages that follow. Isa is compelled to look at her image in shop windows (p.14). In an unusual passage the third-person narrator recalls a 'foolish, flattering lady' saying that, rather than eyes, 'Books are the mirrors of the soul' (p.15), commenting that in this case it is a 'tarnished, a spotted soul' (p.15). Isa later repeats the same sentiment about books as she lists the poets, Keats, Shelley, Yeats, Donne: 'There they were, reflecting' (p.18). Each use of this recurring motif is slightly different: Mrs Manresa uses her mirror confidently to touch up her lipstick (p.120); a character in the pageant recalls her aunt's 'cracked mirror' (p.121). These repetitions gather momentum throughout the text until the pageant reaches the present day when the actors come out from the bushes:

Holding what? Tin cans? Bedroom candlesticks? Old jars? My dear, that's the cheval glass from the Rectory! And the mirror – that I lent her. My mother's. Cracked. What's the notion? Anything that's bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves?

(*Between the Acts*, p.165)

The audience are not pleased, all 'evaded or shaded' themselves (p.167), upset at the fragments that are reflected allowing them no time 'to assume' a suitable posture or expression; no one whole, everyone fragmented and distorted 'And the mirrors! Reflecting us...I called that cruel' (p.179). Only Mrs Manresa powders her nose, tidies her hair and contemplates her reflection with equanimity.

8 The artist in the text

As Isa tries to get a grip on what is happening in the pageant, she asks herself:

Did the plot matter? She shifted and looked over her right shoulder. The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot....Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing.

(*Between the Acts*, p.82)

You might like to think back to the earlier section on 'Genre' and Woolf's preoccupations with the modern novel and what it could do, as these might be seen to surface in Isa's thoughts here. What is certain is that anything that goes on between the acts of La Trobe's pageant is just as important as the acts themselves, for audience and pageant are interdependent. Again, you might like to think back to Woolf's belief that 'we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself' expressed in 'Sketch of the Past', the idea that our collective lives as we live them are a work of art.

Bartholomew tells Mrs Manresa that 'Our part...is to be the audience' (p.54). At times 'There was nothing for the audience to do' (p.60) but the 'tick, tick, tick' of the gramophone 'seemed to hold them together, tranced' (p.75). In the interval, by direct contrast:

the music chanted: *Dispersed are we*. It moaned: *Dispersed are we*. It lamented: *Dispersed are we*, as they streamed, spotting the grass with colour, across the lawns, and down the paths: *Dispersed are we*.

(*Between the Acts*, p.86)

That phrase is repeated over and over again, it is a 'valediction' (p.88). Woolf's artist in the text, Miss La Trobe, feels satisfaction at first as she watches the audience disperse:

she had held them together....Hadh't she, for twenty-five minutes, made them see? A vision imparted was relief from agony ... for one moment ... one moment. Then the music petered out on the last word *we*. She heard the breeze rustle in the branches. She saw Giles Oliver with his back to the audience. Also Cobbet of Cobbs Corner. She hadn't made them see. It was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. Her vision escaped her.

(*Between the Acts*, p.88)



Figure 3 Historical pageant, Undercliffe, Bradford, West Yorkshire. Captioned: 'Episode 2. AD 628'. Photographed by Walter Scott, Bradford. Photo: © Mary Evans Picture Library 2015.

The artist in the text aspires to show her audience the 'hidden pattern', and that, as Woolf said in 'Sketch of the Past', 'all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art'. It is the most impossibly ambitious aim, yet it can be summed up in the simplest of terms: a member of the departing audience is overheard to say 'it brings people together' (p.143). The Reverend G. W. Streatfield says much the same: the pageant indicates 'that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole' (p.172). This seems reasonable and uncontentious, but in 20th-century modernist fashion, the author absents herself from her work: 'La Trobe was invisible' (p.172). Not only will she not explain, but she was 'excruciated by the Rector's interpretation, by the maulings and the manglings of the actors' (p.183). Her vision of meaning in the world is inexplicable; it can only be understood through art. Setting two opposed beliefs against each other, in a comic irony, her pageant raises money 'for the illumination of our dear church' (p.173). In a letter to Roger Fry, whose biography Woolf was writing alongside *Between the Acts*, she wrote 'Directly I'm told what a thing means it becomes hateful to me'. This is also La Trobe's response, and takes us back to the opening quotation from Woolf's letter to Eliot where she praises his verse saying 'I'm held off from understanding by magic' (Nicolson, 1980, p.29). Isobel Grundy comments on Woolf's hatred of interpretation and what it means for her work:

[it is not] wilful obscurantism, but a statement to be taken seriously, related to other important opinions: that words live not in dictionaries but in the mind, that not a 'single word has the same meaning for two people', that the writer has to take one thing and let it stand for twenty.

(Clements and Grundy (eds), 1983, p.200)

The penultimate section of the text sees La Trobe alone. Fleetinglly, 'Glory possessed her', swiftly to be replaced by the feeling that it was 'a failure' (p.188). Standing looking at the now-deserted space where her pageant had been, as a flock of starlings 'attacked' a tree, she dwells on what she suffered, 'triumph, humiliation, ecstasy, despair – for nothing' (p.189). But then, in her despair:

something rose to the surface. 'I should group them,' she murmured, 'here.' It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her.

(*Between the Acts*, p.189)

The creative impulse is indomitable; drowsing at home as 'the cheap clock ticked' (p.191) echoing the 'tick, tick, tick' of the gramophone throughout the play, the vision of her next work takes shape:

There was the high ground at midnight; there was the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words.

(*Between the Acts*, p.191)

Experience and imagination come together, and her next work begins, for *Between the Acts* is about the process of creation. Is Miss La Trobe's belief that she '*suffered...for nothing*' (emphasis added, p.189) over-dramatised? Perhaps, but if art is to take the place of religion, then can anything be more important than communicating connection, pattern, and the value of life for its own sake? Woolf herself went through periods of profound depression after she finished each novel and as we saw at the start of this course, this one was written for the most part while war raged. 'The pressure of this battle wipes London out pretty quick' (Bell, p.292) Woolf wrote in her diary on 9 June 1940. 'It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing 'I' has vanished. No audience. No echo. That's part of one's death' (Bell, p.293).

Activity 7

War is not foregrounded in the text, but is implicit throughout. Read the following short passage from near the beginning of *Between the Acts*. What is the effect?

For [Isa's] generation the newspaper was a book; and, as her father-in-law had dropped *The Times*, she took it and read: 'A horse with a green tail...' which was fantastic. Next, 'The guard at Whitehall...which was romantic and then, building word upon word she read: 'The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown on the bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face...'

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs Swithin carrying a hammer.

(*Between the Acts*, p.18)

Listen to the following audio, which is a reading of this scene:

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio clip 3.](#)

Discussion

If you found that passage powerful or shocking, you are not alone. It is in fact, as Isa thinks, 'real': it was an actual event, which resulted in a widely reported and highly influential court case. This is one instance where Woolf incorporates fact in her fiction, and her contemporary readers would have recognised it immediately. The newspaper article's vivid description has a profound impact on Isa's imagination, which immediately projects the image of the trooper's violence against the girl on the door of the room in which Isa sits and reads. The intrusion of such a shocking event into that domestic space can be seen as a metaphor for the effect of war on everyday lives. If you were to read the whole book, you would see that Isa's reading colours the rest of the day for her with an image of violence. In spite of the 'chime' of repeated rituals associated with the annual pageant, this year in addition she hears: 'The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer' (p.20).

Conscious more than the other characters seem to be of impending war, Giles is absorbed with a 'vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes' (p.49). He reads in the newspaper that 'sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf' (p.43). Consequently he is furious that while war builds in Europe, good manners decree that he can do nothing but watch the village pageant. He is equally furious with himself for complying. The words 'We remain seated' and 'We are the audience' which he hears from the others resonate in his mind not with the pageant, but serve as metaphors for British inactivity at a time of crisis: 'Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fist at you' (p.85). Giles feels impotent, 'manacled to a rock' and 'forced passively to behold indescribable horror' (p.55) as he watches the pageant. It is the same each year.

Listen to the following audio, which is a reading of this scene:

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[Audio clip 4.](#)

Among the pages of scraps and fragments of the audience's reported speech after the pageant, one voice is heard to say:

'The Brookes have gone to Italy, in spite of everything. Rather rash?...If the worst should come – let's hope it won't – they'd hire an aeroplane, so they said...'

(Between the Acts, p.178)

The comment is buried in trivial talk of flower shows, effects of pageants on grass, friends greeting each other. And then, inconsequentially, another voice says:

'I agree, things look worse than ever on the continent. And what's the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to invade us? The aeroplanes, I didn't like to say it, made one think...'

(*Between the Acts*, p.179)

Evidence of conflict is everywhere; set against it is Woolf's belief in art.

Miss La Trobe, imagining her next work, offers one moment of hope; Giles and Isa, at odds throughout the text, suggest another. They 'must fight', but 'after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born'. In the last words of the novel 'audience' and Miss La Trobe's creative imagination come together, as Isa looks out of the window:

It was the night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke.

(*Between the Acts*, p.197)

And Mrs Swithin has resumed reading her *Outline of History*.

Conclusion

Woolf veered between excitement and despair as she neared completion of *Between the Acts*. On 12 January 1941 she wrote in her diary 'Oh yes, I can write: I mean I've a fizz of ideas' (Nicolson, p.459). But on 20 March in a letter to John Lehmann (at the time Managing Director of the Woolfs' Hogarth Press) she said: 'I've just read my so called novel over; and I really don't think it does. Its much too slight and sketchy' (Nicolson, p.482). She planned to revise it for publication later in the year. But her state of mind and her health deteriorated, and on 28 March she drowned herself in the river Ouse near her home.

Between the Acts has a lightness of touch in spite of Woolf's state of mind as she finished it, and the way it anticipates war. It is a work of intricate patterning which demands careful, close reading; but such are the repetitions, rhymes and rhythms of the prose, that even less attentive reading cannot fail to notice connections between the most disparate aspects of the text.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A335 Literature in transition: from 1800 to the present](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/literature/exploring-virginia-woolfs-between-the-acts/content-section-0).

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Acknowledgements

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