

Moments of Laughter: Humor and Wit in Virginia Woolf's Writing

When reading Woolf's work, it is easy to focus on the instances of death and the general sense of foreboding that one feels. Whether the reader knows anything biographical of Virginia Woolf or not, it is common to say that all her stories seem to be depressing and centered around death. Because this is such a natural response, it would not be very interesting to study all the references and allusions to death in her writing. After all, in each of her novels that we've read so far, a main character has died. It is much more interesting, instead, to look at Woolf's humor and the way in which she incorporates this into her work. Humor and wit in Woolf's work are often overlooked, as they tend to be overshadowed by the gloominess so often associated with her. One aspect of the brilliancy of her writing, however, is this combination of tragedy and humor. We can't say that her work is all funny or all tragic, and it is this blurring of the genres that is important. Woolf's wit and humor help us understand her writing. Her focus was on representing real life and reality, and reality is the combination of humor and tragedy. Before we look at this blurring and its importance, we should first look at some examples of humor and wit in Woolf's work, starting with her first book.

The Voyage Out was Woolf's first novel, and it is a serious, rather traditional book. However, even here, at the beginning, we see small moments of humor coming out. One of the first glimpses of her wit appears in the character of Clarissa Dalloway. Later she will flush out this character in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, but here, she is rather cruel to Clarissa, creating her as a stereotype. On the boat, Mrs. Dalloway appears as the quintessential upper middle class society wife. She venerates her husband to the extent that she describes her feelings for him as almost a form of worship. "I suppose I feel for

him what my mother and women of her generation felt for Christ” (*Voyage* 52). Woolf paints such a ridiculous picture of Mrs. Dalloway’s character that the reader can’t help but laugh at her. Later, she is talking with Mrs. Ambrose and states, “‘How much rather one would be a murderer than a bore!’ she added, with her usual air of saying something profound” (*Voyage* 55). Woolf’s way of mocking Mrs. Dalloway is subtle and off-handed. This is part of Woolf’s charm, and why her wit is often missed. She will sneak a sarcastic or biting remark in the midst of a conversation or beautiful description. Her use of satire is also remarkable, and later in the novel, the hotel and its guests provide a bit of social satire. Each character represents a stereotype, and Woolf portrays each mockingly. The two characters that infuse the narrative with their own wit are Hirst and Hewet, and their interactions often bring a smart humor to the story. At one point, Hewet is in Hirst’s room as Hirst is preparing to go to bed. Their interaction is just a small snippet of a larger, more serene picture of the hotel getting ready to sleep for the night, yet again, in her off-handed way, Woolf throws in a little humor to temper Hewet’s philosophizing.

‘Women interest me,’ said Hewet, who sitting on the bed with his chin resting on his knees, paid no attention to the undressing of Mr. Hirst.

‘They’re so stupid,’ said Hirst. “‘You’re sitting on my pyjamas.’

‘I suppose they *are* stupid?’ Hewet wondered.

‘There can’t be two opinions about that, I imagine,’ said Hirst, hopping briskly across the room, ‘unless you’re in love – that fat woman Warrington?’ he enquired.

‘Not one fat woman – all fat women,’ Hewet sighed.

‘The women I saw to-night were not fat,’ said Hirst, who was

taking advantage of Hewet's company to cut his toe-nails. (*Voyage* 106-7)

In a novel where the reader could very easily focus only on the depressing aspects of the storyline - after all the main character does die in the end - it's important not to overlook all the moments of wit and satire that fill *The Voyage Out*.

Here it is important to pause and take a look at some of the Russians' influences on Woolf's writing. As we do so though, we need to keep in mind that the Russian writers were not a *sole* influence on Woolf. Also, we can see that Virginia Woolf had her own sense of humor and it was not reliant on the Russians. But it can also be argued that she may have been encouraged to embrace this blurring of tragedy and comedy that Dostoevsky and Chekov demonstrated in their writing. Although many can argue that the Russians were just as dark as Woolf, there are also great moments of comedy in their works as well. Let's first look at some examples of humor in Dostoevsky's and Chekov's stories that we read this semester. Fyodor Dostoevsky's short story "A Nasty Anecdote," is both incredibly uncomfortable, yet very amusing at the same time. We're watching Ivan Ilyich making a fool of himself, creating a terribly awkward situation, but we can't help being amused by it. He keeps trying to make the situation better, but only continues to make it worse and more uncomfortable. The reader is left cringing, as each page is turned, but smiling at the same time. In Anton Chekov's "A Boring Story," we're given even more humor in Nikolai Stepanovich's descriptions of his boring life. He is speaking about his daily interactions with his wife:

Everyday experience might have convinced my wife that expenses are not diminished by our frequent talking about them, but my wife does not recognize experience and tells me regularly each morning about our officer, and that the

price of bread has gone down, thank God, but sugar has gone up two kopecks – and all this in such a tone as if she were telling me some news. (*Stories* 58)

Chekov inserts this little sarcastic description of Nikolai Stepanovich's frustration with his wife in the midst of a rather depressing account of his daily life. Chekov also gives us some humor and a bit of satire in the short story "The Darling." It is about a woman who is like a chameleon, changing to fit her surroundings, or in this case, her current husband. At one point she is married to a man who manages a lumberyard, and she is so taken with this new husband and his endeavors, that "she dreamed of whole mountains of boards and planks, of long, endless lines of carts carrying lumber somewhere far out of town" (*Stories* 337). Chekov creates this ridiculous woman as almost a stereotype. And again, this is within a story that is mostly sad, and one would not describe as humorous. The Russians had created a method of blurring the lines of genre and giving the reader sadness and humor intertwined within one story.

Virginia Woolf noticed this and mentions this method of writing in her essay "The Russian Point of View." She speaks of the speed at which the Russians pull us through a narrative, with none of the explanations and descriptions of setting that traditional novels had given readers. She states, "Moreover, when the speed is thus increased and the elements of the soul are seen, not separately in scenes of humour or scenes of passion as our slower English minds conceive them, but streaked, involved, inextricably confused, a new panorama of the human mind is revealed" (186). We're speeding through a scene and given humor and tragedy all at once, not broken down into sections or genres as was done in the past. She goes on to say, "The old divisions melt into each other. Men are at once the same time villains and saints; their acts are at once

beautiful and despicable. We love and hate at the same time. There is none of that precise division between good and bad to which we are used” (186-7). Woolf picks this out from the Russians’ writings and whether this had a direct influence on her or not, it is clear that it was an aspect of their writing that she noticed and admired. It is apparent in the Russians that we read that there is no clear-cut distinction between comedy and tragedy in their work.

Around this time, and shortly thereafter, Woolf began more experimental ways of writing. In many of the short stories included in the volume *Monday or Tuesday; Eight Stories*, we’re given many instances of humor and moments of light-heartedness. “A Society” is an entire story of satire. Woolf’s descriptions of the women and the society they’ve created are nothing short of absurd. As they debate whether it is worth it to bring children into this world, one woman, Clorinda, admits, “I, for one, have taken it for granted that it was a woman’s duty to spend her youth in bearing children. I venerated my mother for bearing ten; still more my grandmother for bearing fifteen; it was, I confess, my own ambition to bear twenty” (*Monday* 4). Woolf is examining the worth of this world that man has created in this short story, but is it written in such a satirical way, it is hard not to laugh at her characters. Woolf’s playfulness with writing also comes across in both “An Unwritten Novel” and “Kew Gardens.” In “An Unwritten Novel,” we’re given the thoughts of a woman making up stories about her fellow travelers, and we’re quite amused by the depth and character that she gives these strangers. It is imaginative and whimsical as she addresses both her characters, with their made-up names, in her mind. “[Yes, Minnie; I know you’ve twitched, but one moment – James Moggridge]” (*Monday* 27). And “Kew Gardens” is about the trials and struggles of a

snail maneuvering the terrain of a public garden. This snail does overhear some quite serious discussions on his trip, but these tangents are woven in with the playful struggle of the snail trying to get over a leaf that is in his way.

In “The Mark on the Wall,” we’re given the inner workings of a mind through stream of consciousness, which runs through many different thoughts, often touching on death and tombs, but also alighting on moments of humor too. At one point, the narrator is wondering where the mark on the wall could have come from, and if it’s possibly a hole from a nail where a picture had hung. She continues on this train of thought, thinking of possessions, and “what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization” (*Monday* 48). This quite serious contemplation is followed by a much more light-hearted digression into items the narrator has lost in her lifetime. “[L]et me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime, beginning, for that seems always the most mysterious of losses – what cat would gnaw, what rat would nibble – three pale blue canisters of book-binding tools?” (*Monday* 48). She then continues to list many more objects she’s lost, and sums it up by saying, “The wonder is that I’ve any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment” (*Monday* 48). And in the end, the object that starts this whole rambling affair, the mark on the wall, turns out to be a snail. The whole story is based around this mark, and it turns out to be something so inconsequential. It’s almost like Woolf was having fun with this concept. There was something on the wall that began this train of thought, which took us through moments of darkness and allusions to death, but really the whole time, it’s merely a garden snail!

In the next novel, *Jacob’s Room*, we are given snippets of Jacob Flanders’ life through the eyes of those around him. It is a disjointed account of a young man’s short

life and, if we believe Julia Briggs, is a “protest against the First World War, and the shocking impersonality of the killing machine” (Briggs 84). One might argue that there could be nothing humorous tied into such a serious subject. However, because it is a scrapbook of someone’s life, there are always going to be moments of humor, even if the eventual outcome of Jacob’s life is tragic. Right near the beginning of the novel, when Jacob is still quite young, a family friend, Mr. Floyd, is moving away. He invites Jacob and his two brothers, John and Archer, to come over and choose something of his to keep as a memento of him and their friendship. “Archer chose a paper-knife, because he did not like to choose anything too good; Jacob chose the works of Byron in one volume; John, who was still too young to make a proper choice, chose Mr. Floyd’s kitten” (*Jacob* 19). The genius of this sentence is that Woolf inserts it so nonchalantly into this longer passage of the leaving of Mr. Floyd and continues right along with the boys growing up and going to school. It is hilarious to think of a child choosing someone’s pet to take as a gift from that person, especially as Woolf compares it to what the other boys had chosen. Woolf gives us these little moments of wit throughout *Jacob’s Room*, almost as pauses of respite in a complicated, somewhat depressing account of Jacob’s life. Later, when Jacob is at school, we are introduced to his “friend” Florinda. We are given a short description of her and a bit of family history. One detail that Woolf throws in about Florinda is that “her mother enjoyed the confidence of a Royal master, and now and again Florinda herself was a Princess, but chiefly when drunk” (*Jacob* 79). Adding the phrase “but chiefly when drunk,” adds even more humor to this already absurd statement, and Woolf gives us a great description of Florinda’s ludicrous character. There are also times when Woolf’s wit manifests itself in a mocking tone. For instance, on one of his trips, Jacob

meets a married woman named Sandra Wentworth Williams with whom he has an affair. Woolf portrays Sandra Williams in a very funny and mocking tone. In the scene where we are introduced to her, she is reading with her husband, and thinking deeply.

“‘Everything seems to mean so much,’ said Sandra. But with the sound of her own voice the spell was broken. She forgot the peasants. Only there remained with her a sense of her own beauty, and in front, luckily, there was a looking-glass” (*Jacob* 150). The sharpness with which Woolf gives us the descriptions of Sandra Wentworth Williams’ character makes us smile, even as we’re moved along to the more serious episodes of Jacob’s life. *Jacob’s Room* strongly supports the theory that there has to be humor and comedy in the story of a life, even one that may end tragically.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s humor also takes a bit of a mocking turn, much of which comes across as satirical. Again, here we have humor juxtaposed with a storyline that includes a mentally unstable man who commits suicide, and a cast of characters so mired in their past lives they are barely able to interact with their present selves. Yet, within this, we have Woolf’s sense of humor toying with us in little moments throughout. One character she seems to use as a comedic device is Hugh Whitbread. She makes him out to be a bit of a dandy, and his interactions with the other characters are often quite funny. When Clarissa Dalloway meets him in the street on the way to the flower shop, she notices his fine clothes and manners and thinks to herself that she “felt very sisterly and oddly conscious at the same time of her hat” (*Dalloway* 6). This is a rather odd thing for her to feel, yet somehow relatable and humorous all at once. This is the reader’s first interaction with Hugh, and we see how our main character reacts to him. Later, Hugh is visiting an elderly woman friend, Lady Bruton, for lunch. Hugh is

such a gentleman that he always brings Lady Bruton a bouquet of carnations and asks “Miss Brush, Lady Bruton’s secretary, after her brother in South Africa, which for some reason, Miss Brush, deficient though she was in every attribute of female charm, so much resented that she said ‘Thank you, he’s doing very well in South Africa,’ when, for half a dozen years, he had been doing badly in Portsmouth” (*Jacob* 103). And later, our view of Hugh is rounded out by Peter Walsh’s thoughts on him. “[Y]et here was dear Hugh driving up and spending an hour talking of the past, remembering trifles, praising the homemade cake, though Hugh might eat cake with a Duchess any day of his life, and, to look at him, probably did spend a good deal of time in that agreeable occupation” (*Dalloway* 173). Hugh gives us humor amidst a story full of self-questioning and possible regret at the past.

In our last book of the first half of the semester, we are faced with probably one of the darkest stories we’re read so far. Not only does our main character die quite suddenly in this story of loss and emptiness, but also so do two of her children. But Woolf always gives us windows of rest from her more serious ponderings at life. In *To the Lighthouse*, much of the humor occurs in the interactions of characters with each other. Because we are able to get inside the minds of each character, we know what each thinks of the other, and often these feelings are not reciprocal. Near the beginning of the novel, Charles Tansley is walking to town with Mrs. Ramsay. He is quite excited to get the opportunity to walk with her and wants to carry her bag for her. She, on the other hand finds him intolerable. “He was an awful prig – oh yes, an insufferable bore” (*Lighthouse* 16). And as they pass an advertisement for a traveling circus, Mrs. Ramsay comments on it, saying they all ought to go. Mr. Tansley’s reaction is lukewarm, so Mrs. Ramsay inquires, “Had

they not been taken, she asked, to circuses when they were children? Never, he answered, as if she asked the very thing he wanted; had been longing all these days to say, how they did not go to circuses” (*Lighthouse* 15). Of course here, Mr. Tansley wants to talk about himself and his goals and accomplishments, and Mrs. Ramsay’s question opens this all up to him. But it is Woolf’s way of phrasing this that makes the whole situation humorous. Knowing all the characters’ thoughts creates many comical situations throughout the novel as we see the differing opinions of each towards the others. Even in the last section, which may be the saddest part of the whole book, we’re given a somewhat comical scene in which Mr. Ramsay approaches Lily in order to receive sympathy from her. Lily refuses to give into his wishes, and so, in a panic, trying to think of something to say, compliments his boots. Amazingly, this works! He is distracted from his want of sympathy for his dead wife, and talks and talks of the greatness of his fine boots. Lily is saved from the awkward situation and thinks to herself, “They had reached, she felt, a sunny island where peace dwelt, sanity reigned and the sun for ever shone, the blessed island of good boots” (*Lighthouse* 157). Even within a subject as serious and devastating as the death of Mrs. Ramsay, the reader is given this ridiculous conversation between Lily and Mr. Ramsay concerning his boots.

We’ve now seen, with all these examples, how Woolf can throw in great wit and humor within larger pools of despair. She has an amazing talent for throwing in a very witty or funny comment off-handedly in the middle of a much more serious passage or situation. The reader is not prepared for this, which, of course, makes it that much more comical. This is also the case in real life, as the funniest moments are those that occur when we least expect it. One aspect of writing that Woolf often talked about in her

essays is the desire to portray reality. This blurring of comedy and tragedy is one way of creating reality on paper. In Woolf's essay "Modern Novels," she identifies this blurring and contemplates how reality could be created if one could write in this way. "[I]f one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition" (33). In being able to see the humorous aspects of Virginia Woolf's work, we are better able to understand her writing and her attempt to give us a sense of reality. It has been very easy for us to see the tragic elements of her life reflected in her work, but we should also look at her humor and wit reflected in it as well. Her stories would not be representational of reality if there were no comedy involved. After all, life is like the music she describes in "The String Quartet." "Sorrow, sorrow. Joy, joy. Woven together, like reeds in moonlight. Woven together, inextricably commingled, bound in pain and strewn in sorrow – crash!" (33).