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# Queering the sublime: Virginia Woolf, sexology, and sexuality

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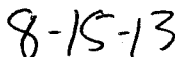
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Queering the Sublime: Virginia Woolf, Sexology, and Sexuality

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BY

Emily Whitmore

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## Abstract

Using Virginia Woolf's novels, *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*, I begin to explore moments where the characters experience the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke. Woolf uses the traditional sublime, but complicates the concept beyond its initial intention. The moments that mimic the sublime, but include the body, the natural world, and artistic creativity grows into what I will call the "queer sublime," which is new for both Woolf scholarship and for the sublime. Woolf's experimentation with the term and part of the "queer sublime" also helps to create a different understanding of lesbian relationships and sexual pleasure than the prevalent ideas of day. Sexologists, such as Havelock Ellis, examine lesbians and their sex lives, but they remove the sexual body from their observations, and reinforce a Victorian understanding of heterosexual sex. Using the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke as a framework, the theories of Elizabeth Grosz as regards art and the natural world, Woolf's ultimate manifestation of the sublime is examined.

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Chapter One  
The Invert in *The Well*: Sexologists and Radclyffe Hall

Late Victorian sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, John Addington Symonds and Stella Browne wrote about inversion and homosexuality in women. Ellis and Krafft-Ebing show a tendency to maintain the essential binary of male and female by defining lesbians as women with masculine tendencies and gay men as males with feminine tendencies. Using the term "invert," suggesting women who were sexually interested in other women were just men in the wrong body, Ellis claimed, "The actively inverted woman [has] one fairly essential character: a more or less distinct trace of masculinity" (54). By attempting to place an inadequately understood sexual desire into a language that people were familiar with, Ellis created and helped to mythologize the "mannish lesbian." One cannot argue with the benefits of Ellis's work for the homosexual as he meant only to show the existence of such individuals, not to try to problematize their existence. Before this recognition, lesbians lived in a gray area where no attention was paid to their actions. Professional women in the Victorian period would defy society's expectations for their lives by forming intimate, committed relationships with other women thereby offering another option to marriage. The reality of the relationship--whether it was sexual or not--was not always known nor was it contested because sex was defined in terms of heterosexual intercourse (Chadwick 217). By providing women with same-sex desire a public identity, Ellis begins the lesbian's navigation of social self-definition.

Ellis's use of the concept of invert might have promoted the cause of the lesbian at the time, but the ability of women to possess a masculine soul is not the revolution that one would hope for. Chiara Beccalossi in "Female Sexual Inversion: Same-Sex Desires

in Italian and British Sexology, 1870-1920," argues that Ellis was not the essentialist that he is called; instead, "he proposed that homosexuality was natural, that there were many noble souls amongst inverts, and he recalled the great achievements of ancient Greek culture to counter the idea that homosexuality was a symptom of moral decadence" (179). As Ellis wanted to change the condition of the homosexual in British society, believing the criminal laws against sodomy were not needed, he is a sympathetic character. Beccalossi's work strives to change the public opinion of Ellis and his work, but the problem remains that his work portrays lesbians as possessing a masculine soul.

The lesbians that Ellis studied existed for him in two categories: the actively inverted, who possess masculine qualities; and the women that they love and sometimes engage in a romantic, physical relationships with. Ellis sorts the women into familiar categories by indicating the gendered desires of the actively inverted. The women that they love are defined by their ugly appearance and lack of appeal to men, which for Ellis "is often the reason why they are open to homosexual advances" (222). The women that are feminine, but not feminine enough to spark the interest of men, are defined in contrast to the masculine women who love them. Ellis does not label this group as masculine, but he does detract from their femininity writing, "they are women who are not very robust and well developed, physically or nervously, and who are not well adapted for child-bearing" while simultaneously describing them as "womanly" (222). Ellis goes further to reinforce his understanding of gender when he discusses the actively inverted women, who always possess an element of masculinity.

The actively inverted female is the mannish lesbian. Ellis claims of the invert that, "She may not be, and frequently is not, what could be called a 'mannish' woman, for

the latter may imitate men on grounds of taste and habit unconnected with sexual perversion, while in the inverted woman the masculine traits are part of an organic instinct which she by no means always wishes to accentuate" (222). Ellis differentiates between the lesbian and an individual that might dress as a man or conduct themselves as men for different reasons than the organic element inborn in the lesbian. While Ellis claims that the invert does not know about her masculine qualities, he does provide for the variation of the inherent traits by claiming, "the inverted woman's masculine element may, in the least degree, consist only in the fact that she makes advances to the woman to whom she is attracted" (222-223). With this circular reasoning, he insists that they possess the trait regardless of how masculinity appears. Beccalossi's desire to sympathize and provide context for his work is valuable, but Ellis is restricted by the ideas and vocabulary of the period and cannot see a lesbian without detecting a hint of masculinity in her.

Edward Carpenter, sexual reformer writing during the same period, refers to the actively inverted by claiming, "We all know women with a strong dash of the masculine temperament, and we all know men whose almost feminine sensibility and intuition see to belie their bodily form. Nature, it might appear, in mixing the elements which go to compose each individual, does not always keep her two ingredients - which represent the two sexes - properly apart" (17). Carpenter sees gender as split into the two categories, male and female, but also acknowledges variations that do not relate to the body. Carpenter, similar to Ellis, uses the construction of "male" and "female" to apply to individuals that, regardless of their biological sex, fit that definition. Carpenter calls masculine women the "intermediate sex", which relates to Ellis's term of invert as they

both refer to gender, and invoke sexuality. He claims, "Some Intermediates of light and leading - doubtless not a few - are physically very reserved and continent; others are sensual in some degree or other. The point is that they are all men, or women, whose most powerful motive comes from the dedication to their own kind" (108). Carpenter and Ellis thus both create terms that address sexuality in terms of misaligned gender.

For sexologists, the sexual pleasure of those considered inverts with their chosen sexual partners was completely ignored, as Ellis in 1901 tells his reader, "Specific physical gratification plays no part in these relationships. The physical sexual feelings began to assert themselves at puberty, but not in association with her ideal emotions" (55). Ellis's reference to "her ideal emotions" is explained later in an account by Miss M (History 37), one of Ellis's subjects, who refers to her feeling for her partner as "'romantic ideal feeling'":

That is the reason why friendship and love have always seemed such holy and beautiful things to me. I have never connected the two sets of feelings. I think I am as strongly sexed as anyone, but I am able to hold a friend in my arms and experience deep comfort and peace without having even a hint of physical sexual feelings. Sexual expression may be quite necessary at certain times and right under certain conditions, but I am convinced that free expression of affection along sentimental channels will do much to minimize the necessity for it along specifically sexual channels. . . (228)

Miss M disregards her sexual feelings, instead choosing to have what amounts to a platonic relationship with her female friends. Her non-sexual relationship qualifies her as

an invert as she does not desire to have sex with men and will continue to have intense romantic feelings for her female friends. Carpenter reinforces Ellis when he tells his reader in 1908 that it is "a great mistake to suppose that their attachments are necessarily sexual, or connected with sexual acts. On the contrary. . . they are often purely emotional" (25). Sexologists were perfectly happy to define a woman as an invert without the sexual act as a part of the qualifications. They effectively removed the sexual body from the concept of inversion.

The sensual actions of the women might not have been important to the sexologists, but the corporeal bodies of the women were. Everything about the women was included in the case studies. Ellis, in a scientific attempt to understand and identify inversion, examined every part of the invert for anything that might indicate where the same-sex desire came from. Sexologists assumed the physical body of a woman would have some sign of the inversion. Assuming the reproductive system was connected to the sexual conduct of the female, sexologists believed that if a woman had sexual desire beyond the time period's expectation or preferred women instead of men then the problem should be visible in the woman's body (Beccalossi 80-106). Ellis exemplifies the idea of the time in a case study by thoroughly describing the physical body of a woman, Miss M.:

She is about 5 feet 4 inches in height, and her features are rather large.

The pelvic measurements are normal, and the external sexual organs are fairly normal in more respects, though somewhat small. At a period ten years subsequent to the date of this history, further examination, under anesthetics, by a gynecologist, showed no traces of ovary on one side.

The general conformation of the body is feminine. . .she is quiet and dignified, but has many boyish tricks of manner and speech which seem to be instinctive; she tried to watch herself continually, however, in order to avoid them, affecting feminine ways and feminine interests, but always being conscious of an effort in so doing. (229)

With the extreme detail and invasive nature of the examination Ellis affirms his attempt to connect the body's appearance with inversion based on whether or not her body is masculine or feminine. The classification of her physical features as either male or female help Ellis to understand her sexuality but in a manner that fails to acknowledge female sexuality as aggressive. As Ellis shows by the inclusion of the detailed description, the desired connection between the appearance of the female body and the condition of inversion was acknowledged.

Ellis continues to list the physical characteristics of women in his study. Miss D. of History 39 is introduced with this description: "Development feminine but manner and movements somewhat boyish. Menstruation scanty and painless. Hips normal, nates small, sexual organs showing some approximation toward infantile type with large labia minora and probably small vagina. Tendency to development of hair on body and especially lower limbs" (Ellis 235). An attempt is made to find a masculine tendency on her body, but all that Ellis notes is hair growth and manner. The bodies of the women, in addition to their lives and thoughts, are under examination for qualities that indicate lesbianism. When nothing can be found to indicate that the individual is an invert, Ellis admits, "While inverted women frequently, though not always, convey an impression of mannishness or boyishness, there are no invariable anatomical characteristics associated

with this impression" (251). Ellis has to admit that the body is not connected to inversion in the literal manner that he assumed. The sexual body has always been divorced from the study of lesbianism, but when the physical features themselves must be disregarded--even as they are being scrutinized--to fit sexologists' theories it is even more removed than before.

Ellis's scrutiny of women's bodies can be understood as part of the time period's desire to understand the lesbian's deviance as legible on the body and thus the cold, methodical tone is understood. But, ironically, the study of women's bodies does bring a bodily element to the studies that the sexologists and the individuals themselves seem elsewhere to avoid. The case histories read like autobiographies where the individuals tell the story of their emotional and sexual feelings from birth to the present for the purpose of understanding their development. Miss M. and Miss. D., whose bodies were both discussed in detail, depict the non-physical nature of their relations with women and how when physical relations are initiated it destroys the pure aspect of their friendship. The subjects themselves also attempt to remove the physical from their experience of inversion, but sexologists, gynecologists, and physiologists all attempt to bring the physical body back into the formula. The women do express desire for other women, and even detail the actions of sex between the women, which generally include: kissing, caressing on another, touching genitals sensually, and lying on top of one another; however, the reluctance to express their desires might be viewed as a way for the women to show femininity, but mostly it shows their reluctance to embrace their bodies and experience their active inversion sexually (Ellis 223-244).

In 1923, Stella Browne, another sexologist, saw inversion and the female body in a slightly different way. She claims that, "A woman who is unwilling to accept either marriage--under present laws--or prostitution, and at the same time refuses to limit her sexual life to auto-erotic manifestations, will find she has to struggle against the whole social order to what is nevertheless her most precious personal right" (65-66). Browne sees women as sexual beings able to express their desires, unlike Ellis, but she does not really encourage homosexual relations between women since society does not approve, and the couple or individual would have to fight in order to gain the sexual expression that is their desire.

Browne also saw the condition of homosexual women as "very pressing and immediate, taking into consideration the fact that in the near future, for at least a generation, the circumstances of women's lives and work will tend, even more than at present, to favour the frigid, and next to the frigid, the inverted types" (65). Her comment indicates that women who want to work or possibly not have children could benefit from the condition of inversion or lack of desire for sex. While her comment is an endorsement of female homosexuality, she oversimplifies sexual orientation as she sees the move toward women not reproducing as indicative of the number of inverts present. Browne did not see the social move toward female independence, which is really what she is talking about with her opinions on frigidity and inversion, as a progressive or acceptable step for women as she does not think that women on their own or with other women could replace the position of men in their lives (66). And by the position of men, she means reproduction. Browne acknowledges the existence of lesbians but worries about the birth rate as the numbers of inverts increases. Her



insistence on the importance of heterosexual relations is not about providing physical satisfaction to women, which she acknowledges as important, but about conception and the survival of the species.

Browne saw inversion as an acceptable option for women who refuse to engage in a heterosexual sexual relationship and did not discuss the mannish lesbian, whereas Ellis and Carpenter conceive of inversion as the soul of one gender trapped in the body of another and no sexual desire. Browne's emphasis on heterosexual relationships was one of concern about birth rates, not an indication of how she viewed lesbian sexual relationships. Her acknowledgment of female sexuality contrasts with Ellis's and Carpenter's refusal to see a sexual component in the homosexual relations. Ellis and Carpenter waltz around the involvement of the body in their study of sexology. They discuss the physical features as linking the individual to their sexual practices possibly, but ultimately have to admit that sexual orientation does not write itself in the corporeal form of an individual. Although they admit to a lack of evidence on the bodies of inverts, they still associate the actively inverted with a quality of masculinity. The sexologists remain limited by their vocabulary, and in their attempt to identify and classify inverts they identify those women that possess some masculine quality. They do not allow for any expression of lesbian love nor of the sexual female body. The field of sexology evolved to include a fuller acknowledgment of female sexuality, but the theories of Ellis and Carpenter were still relevant and known in the 1920s when Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf both wrote and published novels depicting lesbian sexuality. The theory of inversion's emphasis on the mannish lesbian and de-emphasis on physicality find

representation in Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness* with the character of Stephen Gordon.

While male same-sex love was beginning to be recognized in the late nineteenth century, there was still relative silence surrounding lesbianism. The one exception was the Maud Allen case, which stimulated discussion about female same-sex relationships but ultimately reinforced traditional values. In 1918, Noel Pemberton-Billing was tried on charges of libel against Maud Allan. Allan attempted to stage the play *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde. Billing, a member of Parliament, used the connotations of the situation, such as Allan's alleged affair with a possible lesbian, the play's content, and Wilde's own trial for acts of gross indecency, to slander the actress and to use female homosexuality as a scapegoat on which to blame post-World War I anxieties (Medd 21-26). Jodie Medd in "'The Cult of the Clitoris': Anatomy of a National Scandal" claims that Billing was able to slander the actress and attach fear to female homosexuality as, "female homosexuality has been considered by many sexual historians as having been essentially 'unthinkable' to the British popular imagination emerging from Victoria's reign" (26). The trial and scandal were the first time that female homosexuality was openly discussed in such a public forum. Lesbians were discussed before this moment as the sexologists were writing before 1918 and *Salomé* was written in 1891, but the public figure of lesbian, mannish or otherwise, had yet to exist.

Laura Doan, in "Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s," claims that the creation of the current identity of 'mannish lesbian' was constructed from the playful experimentation in fashion that occurred after World War I (664-665).

Women after the end of the war were used to participating in the world differently from the passive creatures that they had been. Women had played an important part in the war effort in terms of labor for the troops--ambulance drivers and munitions girls--and worked the land in place of the men fighting. By leaving the home, women were able to experience the world in a different way. In addition, the world after the Great War also changed dramatically. The advanced technology and the massive loss of life seen on the battlefield affected the culture on the home front. The social experimentation of the period could have something to do with the experimentation in fashion for women in the post-World War I period. Fashions for women in the 1920s allowed for women to dress in pants and appear more masculine than previous decades, shown also by short hair (676). Doan emphasizes the period's gender ambiguity: "the playfulness worked in all directions, and any woman who embraced the trend could revel in sexual ambiguity. . . .lesbians discovered a space for experimentation that enabled them to break away from the sexologists' model of the mannish lesbian and begin to construct, under the cover of a dominant fashion trend" (692-693). Doan claims that the period's fashions enabled a break from sexologists' understanding of masculine lesbians, allowing women to playfully experiment with gender. However, Doan also mentions that some of the women, who wore the fashions of the day, would ultimately marry, and that by 1927, femininity was back in vogue. When in 1928, Radclyffe Hall's obscenity trial occurred, traditional notions of inversion were reinforced by the novel and her appearance (693-694). Sexology's definition of the lesbian might have been temporarily suspended in the atmosphere of the 1920s, but by the end of the decade, inversion was once more the primary theory.

The lesbian had thus become a known, but non-sexual figure by time Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall wrote their respective novels with lesbian protagonists in 1928. Both novelists depicted the lesbian sympathetically but represented her in different ways. In Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen Gordon, the protagonist of the novel, falls in love with three women over the course of the novel and throughout wears only clothing of a young boy or man. The novel follows Stephen from birth to the end of a serious and important relationship in terms not only of Stephen's life but also the argument that Hall engages in. Hall describes Gordon repeatedly as in possession of "the strong line of the jaw, the square, massive brow, the eyebrows, too thick and too wide for beauty" (52). Her body is characterized with the same striking, male features with wide shoulders and slim hips. Hall makes a point of masculinizing the character of Stephen Gordon; the actively inverted Gordon exhibits her masculine tendency more obviously in her physical form than the case histories so as to clearly align with Ellis's Theory of Inversion. Melanie Taylor in "'The Masculine Soul Heaving in the Female Bosom': Theories of Inversion and *The Well of Loneliness*," argues that Gordon's masculine appearance has been overemphasized: "conventional critical readings of Stephen Gordon have neglected the transgender aspects of the characterisation" (287). Gordon's experience, Taylor argues, aligns more with what might currently be described as a transgender individual: "The novel examines the sexological model of the female 'invert', which inspired and informed Hall's character, and demonstrates how theories of inversion failed to distinguish between cross-gender identification and same-sex desire" (287). She is correct in that sexologists do confuse same-sex desire and cross-gender identification, or rather that they do not attempt to separate them, instead using the umbrella term of

"invert." The problem with Taylor's assumption about the identity of Gordon is that she also confuses the categories of gender and sexuality. Stephen may or may not be a transgendered individual, but she clearly loves women. Taylor also disregards Hall's acceptance of Ellis's terms. Hall's novel includes references to Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Karl Ulrichs, both sexologists, who are used by Stephen Gordon's father to help understand his daughter. Hall also allows Ellis a commentary section where he states that *The Well of Loneliness* presents, "in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us to-day" (8).

Hall's connection of the novel honestly and directly to the sexologist was a move to establish the lesbian's existence using a known system of identification. In the influential article, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," Esther Newton argues that "Hall and many other feminists like her embraced, sometimes with ambivalence, the image of the mannish lesbian and the discourse of the sexologists about inversion primarily because they desperately wanted to break out of the asexual model of romantic friendship" (560). Hall uses sexology as a way to acknowledge the relationships between women. At the same time, she presents Stephen Gordon as sympathetic: she sacrifices her third relationship encouraging her lover to marry a man. After her lover leaves, Gordon's cry to God of, "Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence," presents Gordon as unhappy with the manner in which the invert exists in society (Hall 437). The sympathetic invert created in Stephen Gordon allows Hall to use the theories of the sexologists to recognize the existence of lesbian relationships, but the emotional plea indicates that recognition is not the only goal of the novel. However, Hall's representation of Gordon fits the

understanding of those classified as actively inverted and removes all focus from the sexual pleasure of the individual. Hall and the sexologists ignore the sensual body in regards to lesbian identity, instead focusing on the traits and tendencies of the figure.

When *The Well of Loneliness* went to trial in November 1928, Woolf was asked to testify in favor of the novel. Her husband, Leonard, and sister, Vanessa Bell, did not want her to testify. Woolf writes that they feared she would "cast a shadow over Bloomsbury" (L.3 555). The shadow of lesbianism was what they wanted to avoid, although Woolf claims, "Forgetting where I was I should speak the truth" (L.3 555). She would, she said, discuss the case openly and refuse to avoid the trial as others had, due to their fear of being perceived as tainted by it. In order to prepare for the trial, she read the novel. In November, she writes, "I have to appear in favour of it, and have already wasted hours reading it and talking about it, but I hope to be free on Thursday. The dulness of the book is such that any indecency may lurk there - one simply can't keep one's eyes on the page -" (L.3 556). Woolf did not end up testifying at the trial, but her opinion of the novel was clear: it was not good.

Woolf's novel, in contrast, did not trigger an obscenity trial despite its lesbian theme. She is able, with a playful use of time--the novel spans four hundred years--and a fantastical element of biological gender change, to evade the censors. Woolf's novel fights the sexologists' understanding of lesbianism and the mannish lesbian with some of the same elements that aided in avoiding a censorship trial. By creating a character whose biological gender changes, but whose romantic interests are not affected, Woolf defies the rigid understanding of inverts as women with masculine traits. Ellis and Carpenter understand sexuality in terms of gender, where the female individual appears

masculine in dress, appearance, or personality, and must desire sexual partners of the same gender; however, *Orlando* shows a character who will dress in feminine clothing one day and masculine dress the next and loves both men and women. Sexuality evades definition in the novel by Woolf's representation of the character in such a way that s/he cannot remotely fit the inversion concept.

The sexologist's definition does not just deal with gender, but also ignores the sexual expression of the female inverts. Another way in which Woolf surpasses the term invert and association with sexology is her inclusion of the body in *Orlando*. In order to more accurately depict sensuality, Woolf uses the literary concept of the sublime. The idea appears in her early novels, *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*, where it is seen in a relatively traditional manner. Woolf begins to experiment with the sublime as the novels progress, and by *Orlando*, has reached the point of transforming the sublime through her inclusion of the body. She includes the erotic body in her depictions of moments when Orlando experiences a heightened moment of sensation or sublime, a moment which is generally followed by artistic expression. The body's inclusion in sublime moments refutes the sexologists' disregard of female same-sex love's sensual representation. The body that sexologists ignore becomes an important part of Woolf's novels.

## Chapter Two

### The Experimental Movement of the Sublime in Virginia Woolf's Early Novels

The sexologists and Radclyffe Hall show with their work that they lack the language for same-sex sexual pleasure. Virginia Woolf experimented with the concept of the sublime in order to find a method to show same-sex pleasure. In *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To The Lighthouse* (1927), the concept of the sublime is helpful in understanding how Woolf moves toward a way to express embodied pleasure. Characters in Woolf's work experience moments that resemble the romantic notion of the sublime yet resist the binaries of male and female, human and nonhuman, and body and environment. Physical pleasure helps to move the character to a heightened realm of sensation beyond labels. The pleasure available to the human body enables the individual to exist in a space or experience for a moment indefinable by the world around them. Early sexologists, in their attempt to understand the homosexual experience, used their vocabulary to explain it but failed to address sexual pleasure or anything that didn't fit their taxonomies. The intensely sensual moments Woolf depicts resist the sexologists' understanding of sexuality. But first, to understand what Woolf does, it's useful to understand the aesthetic concept of the "sublime."

The sublime is a literary and philosophical concept with a history, and while I use that term similarly to how it was originally conceived, I will also be showing how Woolf changes the concept to fit her own needs. The sublime can be found first in Longinus's first-century aesthetic treatise about the sublime, but I will be focusing on the romantic sublime, and more specifically on Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* from 1757, where the sublime is defined as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to



say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is analogous to terror" (39). Burke goes on to say that the sublime "is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39). The sublime pushes the human brain to the limits with the strongest emotions possible: terror, pain, and danger. Burke claims, "I say the strongest emotions, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure" (39). Burke places the sublime in a position of power by the comparison with pleasure, which gets associated with the beautiful. The beautiful is defined by Burke as "that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it" (91). He also links sexual pleasure and lust incited by the object viewed as a part of the concept of the beautiful (Burke 42-43). Burke devalues the power of the human body on the mind by aligning it with the beautiful. Nicola Trott explains, "The beautiful concerns social or sexual relations, and turns upon feelings of pleasure; the sublime concerns the solitary individual, and turns upon the still more powerful feelings of terror or pain. As the associate of 'power' and the producer of the 'strongest emotion' (39), the sublime is a privileged term--and this superior attraction recurs again and again" (72-73). The sublime is set above the beautiful in the definition of the words by the intensity of the experience of the sublime. As Trott explains, it is a privileged term that lacks a bodily element, as it is set at odds with the human form. As the two terms are so clearly contrasted they have acquired gender connotations. Trott explains, "The sublime is associated with 'masculine' qualities of strength and size (those capable of invoking admiration, awe or terror); the beautiful with 'feminine' qualities of smallness, smoothness and delicacy" (81). The sublime carries with it a connotation of gendered superiority and a disconnection from the sexual body.

Burke's sublime, which involves the mind experiencing the excess of the world around it, is one of the strongest emotions. Burke links his definition of the sublime to nature. He states, "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other" (Burke 57). The definition captures how an individual can experience a moment of transcendence through the natural world. The individual will be so enraptured with the view that he is incapable of anything except a true experience of that moment.

The famous image that embodies the romantic sublime is Caspar David Friedrich's painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. The image is one of a male figure standing at the top of a rock formation overlooking the summits of other mountains and other stone outcroppings all covered in a fog that partially obscures the scene. The image is iconic and associated with the sublime because the grandeur of its vastness creates in the viewer a response of fear or terror. The fog plays a part in the fear created from the scene as it distorts the natural landscape, but the magnitude of the scene also creates the sublime. The figure in the painting is experiencing a sublime moment due to the environment and the emotion associated with it.

Since the 1980s, feminist critics have worked to define a "feminine sublime." In *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, Barbara Claire Freeman agrees with Burke's definition of the sublime but works to move his definition past the gendered construction. Freeman's definition of the term "feminine sublime" grows from the fact that inherent in the image of the gentleman traveller associated with the Romantic

sublime is a sense of mastery and dominance; the feminine sublime is a way to describe not the opposite of the Burkean sublime, but a space between the mastery and surrender. Freeman's conceptualization of the space that can exist when individuals occupy not one side or another of a binary but the space between is helpful. Freeman claims, "I employ the term 'feminine' as that which contests binaries, including a rigid notion of sexual difference that would insist upon separate male and female selves" (9). Freeman, by ascribing a feminine sublime to the female characters in novels written by women, does not intend to show women as victims of patriarchy or of the male characters; she argues, "A too exclusive focus on women's victimization may lead us to misread the orders of discourse through which women exert agency, even as they confront its limits" (6).

Freeman uses the examples of:

Edna Pontellier's encounters with the ocean during Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Lily Bart's final speculation with the narcotic chloral in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, Sasha Jensen's apparently eager assent to sex with a man she detests in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, or Sethe Sugg's murder of her daughter in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. . .critics frequently condemn the heroine's self-indulgence or blame the society that victimizes her (6)

Freeman argues that the sublime allows the female protagonists a different understanding than previously accepted; instead of figures that are passive or pawns of the culture around them, the women are "subjects who exert will...not merely as victims who are acted upon" (6). In the literary examples provided, Freeman provides situations where the female characters are the subjects exerting power over the objects of ocean, narcotic

chloral, a man, and a daughter. She does change the manner in which the characters are viewed with the help of the feminine sublime, but she also reinforces what she sees as an inherent sense of mastery present within the sublime.

Woolf reveals her interest in the sublime in an essay about Dorothy Wordsworth in *The Second Common Reader*. There she describes the relationship of individuals to nature in a way that complicates Burke's formulation. She emphasizes Dorothy's fusion to nature through her brother William: "thus giving to Nature, thus receiving from Nature, it seemed, as the arduous and ascetic days went by, that Nature and Dorothy had grown together in perfect sympathy - a sympathy not cold or vegetable or inhuman because at the core of it burnt that other love for 'my beloved', her brother, who was indeed its heart and inspiration. William and Nature and Dorothy herself, were they not one being?" (169). The image created with the scene is one of male and female joined with nature in a synergetic relationship and also one that is infused with love. Nature is not separate from Dorothy and her brother; instead, they are all welded together. The domination and ownership that Freeman sees as part of the sublime disappears in the scene, and the bond between the brother, sister, and the natural world prevails.

Woolf also shows her interest in the sublime by using the concept in *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*. In moments that resemble the Burkean Sublime, Woolf often places her characters in situations like that of Friedrich's traveler, then explores how they respond to an apparently infinite, incomprehensible landscape. Freeman in her work with the Feminine Sublime claims that inherent in the Burkean Sublime is a sense of mastery over the object, which enables the transcendence of the viewer (3). The gentleman traveler in his expression of the sublime inherently feels that

he owns the object or scene. Thus combining Freeman and Burke, the three elements that combine to create a traditional sublime moment are: the emotions of fear, terror, or pain; infinite space either clearly seen or implied; and a sense of proprietorship over the object of the sublime. Freeman claims the Feminine Sublime "does not attempt to master its objects of rapture" (3). Freeman sees in the traditional sublime, in contrast, a need to master the object of rapture. As Woolf toys with sublime, she most commonly alters the sense of proprietorship. The sublime moment as defined here shows up frequently in *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*.

Of these three novels, *The Voyage Out*, Woolf's earliest novel, contains moments that most strongly invoke the Burkean sublime. From Rachel and her Aunt Helen's trip to the top of a mountain to the boat ride up the river into the jungle, *The Voyage Out* offers a traditional type of sublime experience for the characters including terror, a sense of infinitude, and mastery. In the later and more experimental novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the elements of the sublime are present, but Woolf is more liable to critique and complicate the concept. The movement from *The Voyage Out* to *To the Lighthouse* shows that Woolf engages with the literary convention of the sublime and grows slowly through her work to challenge and change it.

In *The Voyage Out*, when Rachel and her Aunt Helen take part in an expedition to climb Monte Rosa, they, along with the rest of the party, experience at the top of the mountain a moment where their minds cannot process the scene and the vast expanse that they are looking at. As they stare at the sandy beaches, forests, and nearby mountains, the viewers cannot truly comprehend the picture. They exhibit precisely the characteristics of Friedrich's painting that make it sublime--the vast landscapes that

inspire fear in the group. The figures look over the land, and see "an immense space-- grey sands running into forest, and forest merging in mountains, and mountains washed by air,--the infinite distances of South America" (Woolf 131). The language of the scene mimics the wanderer's scenery of mountains and sky, and the definition of the sublime, as Woolf claims the scene is infinite. The characters stand in awe and wonder and look to one another to understand the moment. They turn to one another to help understand the scene before them as "the effect of so much space was at first rather chilling" (Woolf 131-132). One member of the party, Evelyn, grabs the hand of the woman next to her, while Hewet looks at the individuals on the mountaintop instead (Woolf 131-132). They stand in the same position as the wanderer in the painting, feeling the fear of that space, which is seen in their response. And just as Freeman suggests is typical of the masculine sublime, the characters assert their dominance over the landscape by their position standing over the land. The scene implies dominance also by the response of the character Evelyn, who states that, if she were a man, she'd "raise a troop and conquer some great territory and make it splendid" (Woolf 136). Evelyn feels the mastery inherent in the sublime and is moved to say that actual ownership is the next step. The characters feel terror at the scene propelling them to a heightened state of being and respond by bonding together to assert their mastery.

Freeman uncovers a power dynamic implicit in the romantic sublime, whereby the viewer uses the view to heighten his own experience. The viewer regulates the view, which provides the inspiration for the sublime, and a needed element for it. The fear or pain plus the sense of vast space used to define the sublime originally do not disappear.

But the viewer is able to assert mastery even as he experiences them. The three elements combine to present a sublime moment.

In Woolf's sublime moments, another kind of mastery emerges when the experiencers respond to an object or view by creating art. Neither Freeman nor Burke discusses the creation or product that occurs after an experience of the sublime, but Freeman's definition of the sublime suggests an artist muse relationship, where the figure is inspired by an object in order to experience the sublime. The same could be said of an artist figure using a muse to then create art. The mastery of the figure over the scene, which creates the sublime moment, then translates into that individual's using the experience as the inspiration for creation. The artist figure or wanderer are both associated with masculinity and use the object/muse to create art or experience the sublime. Whitney Chadwick, an art historian, claims that part of "the early Modernist myth. . .concerns the extent to which the major paintings--and sometimes sculptures--associated with the development of modern art wrest their formal and stylistic innovations from an erotically based assault on the female form" (279). She uses the examples of Manet's and Picasso's prostitutes, Matisse's nudes, and Renior, claiming, "I paint with my prick," which all work toward, "fusing the sexual and artistic by equating artistic creation with male sexual energy, presenting women as powerless and sexually subjugated" (Chadwick 279). The artist is the wanderer in that he has implied power over the object and both use the object to experience either creation or the sublime. Artistry is not strictly a part of the sublime experience, but those who experience a sublime moment might also use that inspiration to create something.

Rachel in *The Voyage Out* is a gifted piano player and composer. In one scene surrounded by a typically sublime view, she responds by creating music. Rachel and her Aunt Helen attend a dance at the hotel where the other participants in the hike are staying. Traditionally, the sublime revolves around an individual's experience, which is why in Friedrich's painting there is a solitary figure, but Woolf often includes multiple observers as part of the experience. Due to the late hour, the band stops playing, but Rachel takes over. As she begins to play, the people in the room are all affected differently by the music. The dancers as they pick up the beat display "a complete lack of self-consciousness" (Woolf 166). They are moving with the music and allow it to dictate their actions for them, instead of proceeding with very planned steps based on the tune. As dawn appears, the dancers become aware of the scene: "Outside, the mountains showed very pure and remote; the dew was sparkling on the grass, and the sky was flushed with blue, save for the pale yellows and pinks in the East" (Woolf 167). As they move to observe the sunset, Rachel "though robbed of her audience, had gone on playing to herself. From John Peel she passed to Bach, who was at this time the subject of her intense enthusiasm" (Woolf 167). Rachel feels awe at the experience of playing the piano, and the scene around her also contributes to the sublime. The terror of the moment is seen in the scenery. The characters might not be on the top of the mountain as the wanderer was, but the scene that surrounds them inspires fear and infinity, by hinting at the depth of the mountains and sky. Then, as the creator of the music and the moment, Rachel exerts power over the scene.

As Rachel continues to play, the younger dancers walk into the ballroom, where they see a vision of "a building with spaces and columns succeeding each other rising in



the empty space. Then they began to see themselves and their lives, and the whole of human life advancing very nobly under the direction of the music" (Woolf 167). The young dancers, who are not dancing at this point, are caught up in the creative moment that Rachel experiences. Rachel is the figure experiencing the sublime in the scene as she is in the position of creator due to which she is feeling awe, and the surrounding scene provides for the appearance of infinity. Rachel, seeing the building in the mist, which can be attributed to Rachel as in a previous moment of musical artistry when "an invisible line seemed to string the notes together, from which rose a shape, a building" (Woolf 57). Rachel enables the scene and is the sublime creator as when she stops playing the dancers wanted "nothing but sleep" (Woolf 167).

The vision of such magnitude and depth, with the building materializing and all of human life appearing, shows a play with the sublime, which includes not only the artist, Rachel, but is powerful enough to include those around the artist, the dancers. Although the distinction is clear between the artist and the objects--they are able to see a creation due to Rachel--from the mind of Rachel, the building appears to the group to connect them all. Laura Doyle in "'These Emotions of the Body': Intercorporeal Narrative in *To the Lighthouse*" claims that Woolf is able to "turn inside out the unnamed, body-transcending core of traditional Western philosophy and narrative" (42). The narrators of Woolf's works are able to do this by wavering "between vertigo and exhilaration as they stand on the edge of 'that emptiness there'" (Doyle 42-43). Challenging the manner in which Western philosophy conceives of individuals, Woolf looks at how the characters' consciousnesses overlap. She sees objects that characters have in common as a point of intersection for the characters' minds (Doyle 55). Doyle claims, "Objects in the world

literally serve as points of intersection carrying the narrator between character and character or past, present, and future" (Doyle 55). The characters connect with one another through the commonly used or seen objects in the world, which they inhabit. In the scene with Rachel at the piano, the connecting object could be seen as the music. Rachel in her sublime fervor would not be able to focus on a similar object in the room to all the dancers in order to access their minds, so the music is the point of intersection for the scene. Doyle's mention of the narrator as a type of pivot for the interconnections between the characters also allows for music to facilitate the connection between the characters as the narration is told at this point in the third person. Rachel as the creator does not have to acknowledge the music that she creates; instead she merely creates it while the dancers are able through the music to share her mental experience as they inspire its creation.

Characters who do not directly experience the sublime are able to participate in the experience of the figure who does. When the same group of people at the dance and the mountaintop decide to take a trip up the river into the South American jungle, they enter an environment where the elements of the sublime surround them. As the ship moves toward the wild, away from civilization, changes to the greenery along the bank and the noise of the world occur. The travelers see that "the trees and the undergrowth seemed to be strangling each other near the ground in a multitudinous wrestle; while here and there a splendid tree towered high above the swarm, shaking its thin green umbrellas lightly in the upper air...a bird gave a wild laugh, a monkey chuckled a malicious question" (Woolf 267). The forest in the novel presents the depth, impenetrability and fear associated with the sublime. The persistent rhythms of the background are shown in

the jungle. The depth of the jungle is seen in the vegetation, and the birds' and animals' noises. The inability to see clearly from the boat into the distance of the jungle echoes the fog that Friedrich's traveler sees and creates fear in the observers. The final element of the sublime is seen in the British characters, whose association with the British Empire indicates a colonial mastery over the scene--at least until they are fully engulfed by the jungle. Nick Montgomery, in "Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice:

Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," links the group's experience in the jungle to the sublime. He claims that "at the heart of Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* is a disengagement from the authority of the paternal word and an affirmation of the semiotic otherness of the maternal voice" (34). He uses the word semiotic to mean the aural properties of language, such as cadence and stress. The jungle provides for Montgomery the perfect opposition to the patriarchal culture and language system of the hotel and boat ride from England to South America. The noises of industry found in the hotel and boat are markedly different from the hum of the jungle.

Montgomery aligns the journey into the jungle with a break from the culture and an entry into the primordial through the sounds of the location. He claims, "For Hewet and Rachel, the excursion into the wilderness becomes a sublime release from the symbolic order. . . a reentry into the musical bliss of an originary acoustic cocoon" (Montgomery 47). The jungle journey with its primal acoustics offers Rachel a sublime moment; she becomes the wanderer in the scene, but according to Montgomery she surrenders briefly to the primordial rather than seeking to dominate it.

In the aural atmosphere of the jungle, Rachel and Hewet become engaged. They struggle to articulate their thoughts and emotions: "So beautiful. . . the sound of their

voices that by degrees they scarcely listened to the words they framed. Long silences came between their words, which were no longer silences of struggle and confusion but refreshing silences, in which trivial thoughts moved easily" (Woolf 283). They are unable to operate as they normally would in society. The characters, instead of keeping distance from the jungle by remaining on the boat or appearing separate and in control of it similar to the wanderer in Friedrich's famous painting, enter the space, affected by it as their communication changes. Their entrance into the wild environment as opposed to refraining from entering the space or finding a safe vantage point shows Woolf's transformation of the concept.

Rachel's experience of the sublime allows her to recreate herself. In the world of symbolic language she struggles to express herself as a fully developed individual. She is not sexually excited until entering the jungle. After kissing Mr. Dalloway, she feels pleasure and a sense of invincibility but dreams of a grotesque man in a damp tunnel (Woolf 76-77). This kiss is not the moment when Rachel experiences a sexual awakening. She feels wonderful after but hints at an obstacle with the dream. When Aunt Helen asks about the experience, Rachel says "I did mind. . .I dreamt. I couldn't sleep" (Woolf 80). Her experience with Mr. Dalloway shows a lack of empowerment and sexual arousal. The jungle, on the other hand, represents a space where she is sexually awakened: "Very gently and quietly, almost as if it were the blood singing in her veins, or the water of the stream running over stones, Rachel became conscious of a new feeling within her. She wondered for a moment what it was, and then said to herself, with a little surprise at recognising in her own person so famous a thing: 'This is happiness, I suppose.'" (Woolf 283). Rachel's feeling of happiness, with the blood

pumping through her body, her unique awakening, and the environment all indicate that something intense happens for Rachel. She connects with her body to the humming world around her. It is a personal experience for her and does create something new: a sexually awakened person. In addition to the environment's influence on Rachel, she associates her experience with water rushing over stones. Water can easily be associated with sexual arousal, but the water over stones signals a progression over obstacles. For Rachel, this journal of self-discovery was not easy.

When Aunt Helen enters the scene, Rachel's moment of sexual discovery is jumbled with a moment of heteronormativity. As she lies in the grass, Aunt Helen grabs her and they roll around on the ground, presumably out of joy at the news of the engagement. After Rachel's sexual awakening, her rolling around with Aunt Helen might possibly hint at a bisexual or polymorphous awakening, but it is quickly followed with an image that hints at a heterosexual union. As Rachel lies in the grass, she looks up to see "the heads of a man and a woman, of Terence [Hewet] and Helen. Both were flushed, both laughing, and the lips were moving; they came together and kissed in the air above her. Broken fragments of speech came down to her on the ground. She thought she heard them speak of love and then of marriage" (Woolf 283-284). The moment of Rachel's sense of her own sexuality, clarified by those around her, is accompanied by the heterosexual or normative understanding of sexuality that is presented to her after her sexual awakening. Her contact with Helen is counteracted by the scene. The space of the jungle as free from patriarchy is reconfigured with the image of Hewet and Helen in her view kissing and the conversation about marriage, which at the time would have only involved a man and woman. The power of the environment also disappears as Rachel's

experience and the aftermath fade. Rachel's response to the action is as follows: "Raising herself and sitting up, she too realised Helen's soft body, the strong and hospitable arms, and happiness swelling and breaking in one vast wave" (Woolf 284). Her pleasure, still described in terms of liquid, is not the difficult path full of rocks but the ease of a wave breaking on a beach. The mention of Helen's body and the lack of stones could reference a realization of Rachel's sexual preference. By the end of the experience, she is able to stay sexual on her own terms. Although heterosexuality oppresses her, the water imagery appears to show that Rachel's sexuality is her own.

Rachel is the wanderer in *The Voyage Out*, occupying the role of the subject in Friedrich's painting. She is the apex of sublimity in the novel, particularly during the jungle sequence. But *The Voyage Out* hints at an alternative to the Romantic sublime. When the consciousnesses of the dancers overlaps onto Rachel's mental creation, and the individuals on the mountaintop turn to one another suggesting characters' mental states can transfer or blend, there is a hint of a possible merge of characters with each other and, in Rachel's experience in the jungle, with the natural world. With *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf takes her exploration of the sublime further.

Peter Walsh of *Mrs. Dalloway* experiences a traditional sublime moment. In a semi-conscious state of napping in public, Peter looks up and seeing "branches he rapidly endows them with womanhood" (Woolf 85). The public park that he finds himself in quickly becomes female. The trees themselves stand in for femininity, but the vision does not stop there. Sirens with "faces which fisherman flounder through floods to embrace" are mentioned as well (Woolf 86). The world around Peter, even as he is

slightly removed from reality, is female. He begins to talk about himself as the "solitary traveller" confronting a female figure who, "made of sky and branches as it is, had risen from the troubled sea. . .as a shape might be sucked up out of the waves to shower down from her magnificent hands compassion, comprehension, absolution" (Woolf 86). Not only is the language used in the scene gendered, but also Peter reiterates what could be seen as a Burkean understanding of the sublime. Peter in his vision is the traveller who stands on the cliff top overseeing the land. His imagining has a Victorian understanding of gender as the clearly female figure in his vision--she is linked to the feminine branches and referred to as she--is there to comfort and understand him, but the experience remains about him. Peter wants the great woman to "with a toss of her head, mount me on her streamers and let me blow to nothingness with the rest" (Woolf 87). Peter grants the figure power by claiming that she will take him somewhere and could grant him absolution, but the sublime experience of the moment remains his by his claiming himself as the "solitary traveller," and by his experiencing astonishment at the scene. The figure as a part of his vision does not exist outside of that. Peter imagines the ideal of womanhood: a maternal, beautiful, and natural figure, who helps him experience the sublime.

Mrs. Dalloway's sublime moments continue the gendered experience of Peter with the aid of an object in order to achieve the sublime. Her skill set involves planning and executing parties that further her husband's career. Although she embodies the middle class Victorian ideal for women, she is not solely defined by the position. After a walk to buy flowers, Mrs. Dalloway retreats to her attic room for a nap. In a semi-conscious state, Clarissa begins to think about her sensuality as unresponsive to men. She lacks

something in the relationship with her husband. She later claims, "she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman. . .she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt" (Woolf 46-47). Mrs. Dalloway clearly indicates that she prefers the sexual presence of women, but the manner in which she explains the emotion is in terms of how the sexologists saw homosexuality. Mrs. Dalloway aligns herself with inversion when she claims that she feels what men feel. She cannot explain to herself even that what she feels is just pleasure and her sexual attraction is focused on women; instead, she must link her sexuality with that of men. But her lack of language to express properly her preferences does not limit the pleasure she will experience. She at least acknowledges her pleasure even though this pleasure does not fit what she is supposed to feel: sexual attraction for her husband.

When Mrs. Dalloway allows herself, in her words, to feel what men feel, or to follow the pleasurable thoughts where they may lead, she experiences a sublime moment: "It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin" (Woolf 47). Mrs. Dalloway is the wanderer in the scene as she pushed "to the farthest verge" of the moment. The mention of the world indicates a vast image indicating the infinite associated with the sublime, and the rush indicates terror in the scene as she feels the world. Mrs. Dalloway is similar to the wanderer in this moment as she sees an infinite image and feels fear associated with it. Her sublime moment does not last long, and her mind then sees an illumination of "a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed" (Woolf 47). The match



is usually read as a clitoral image, but a phallic shaped object enters a vaginal shaped flower to reveal that Clarissa is once more feeling what a man might or "an inner meaning almost expressed". The heterosexual image of sex replaces the world that she did see and indicates that the moment is over. She might have momentarily experienced a sublime moment, but she returns to her gendered language very quickly. Much as Rachel sees during her sublime moment in the jungle with the pairing of her aunt and fiancé, Mrs. Dalloway's moment ends with a normative image. Her lack of language to fully understand her situation is most clear with the image provided after her sexual experience. She does not just see the flower lit or even just the crocus; instead it has an object inside it.

Mrs. Dalloway's next sublime moment continues Woolf's experimentation of the sublime and Clarissa's sexuality. Clarissa describes kissing Sally Seton: "Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally" (Woolf 52). This moment does a couple of interesting things as a sublime experience. Kate Haffey in "Exquisite Moments and the Temporality of the Kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*" discusses the moment as intriguing due to the relationship to time. During the moment of the kiss, Haffey claims it "interrupts her [Mrs. Dalloway] inevitable movement toward marriage and reproduction" (137). The kiss for Mrs. Dalloway is the "most exquisite moment of her own life" and can be viewed as counter to the route her presumed heterosexual life was meant to take. Her inclusion of her whole life in her reflection of it and the timelessness that it contains add a layer to the kiss. The moment of reflection

itself is as sublime as her initial experience of the kiss. The world again appears in the moment signifying infinity and terror. The moment of the kiss itself disrupts Mrs. Dalloway's predicted path of courtship, marriage, and reproduction, and the reflection of the kiss with its link between the past and present shows sublimity.

The presence of the flower causes one to wonder why both sexual experiences for Mrs. Dalloway include flowers. Clarissa might, because of the experience, link flowers to this kiss, but why after her nap does she associate the flower then with something contrary to her true emotions? She so strongly associates herself with the gendered language of her world that she limits the experience of her sexuality. The flower lacking the match might indicate a symbol for female anatomy, but later in the scene Clarissa compares the kiss to a diamond (Woolf 52-53). Kathryn Simpson in "Pearl-diving: Inscriptions of Desire and Creativity in H.D. and Woolf" finds that images of gems and pearls symbolize female sexuality and creativity, but in the scene discussed, "it may seem that the clitoral imagery of precious gems in this novel does suggest a 'natural' lesbian sexuality and pleasure for Clarissa, a sexuality which is repressed but which continues to suffuse her experience. However, Clarissa's liminal position on the borders of heterosexuality and homosexuality problematizes any notion of a readily definable or fixed sexuality for her" (Simpson 45). Simpson addresses--with her reflection on the moment between Clarissa and Sally--the problem with Clarissa's moments. She has passion for women and lacks a sexual connection with men, but describes moments of sexual pleasure in gendered terms and in a similar way to how sexologists would identify her as an invert with masculine tendencies. Her sublime moment does not disconnect her fully from the world around her, and her body is not truly allowed to experience the

moment for what it is: erotic pleasure. Her moment is born more of restriction than release.

*To the Lighthouse*, the novel published closest to *Orlando*, is the most experimental of the novels where Woolf uses the sublime. In previous novels, Woolf links the sublime to terror, infinity, and mastery even as she adapts it to show a figure experiencing a sublime moment that other characters share, and sometimes moving toward artistic creation afterwards. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf pushes her version of the sublime even further by connecting the consciousness of a character with an inanimate object.

One such moment occurs when Nancy sees "the whole world spread out beneath her, as if it were Constantinople seen through a mist, however heavy-eyed one might be, one must needs ask, 'Is that Santa Sofia?' 'Is that the Golden Horn?'" The passage then blurs Nancy's vision with Minta's:

So Nancy asked, when Minta took her hand. 'What is it that she wants? Is it that?' And what was that? Here and there emerged from the mist (as Nancy looked down upon life spread beneath her) a pinnacle, a dome; prominent things, without names. But when Minta dropped her hand, as she did when they ran down the hillside, all that. . .whatever it was that had protruded through the mist, sank down into it and disappeared. (Woolf 73-74)

The scene is similar to *The Voyage Out*, where one character sees the scene then includes others, in this case one other. Nancy sees the scene then Minta grabs Nancy's hand.

Nancy is the wanderer in the scene, who sees the world and Constantinople as out of the mist. The scene shows the vastness required for the sublime, the terror and awe shown by the questions that Nancy needs to ask. Nancy does not understand what she is seeing or why but hints that Minta must. The scene is courtesy of Nancy, but through the physical stimulation of one by the other, seen by both and maintained. The scene combines elements from two such sublime moments already examined. The vision of cities was seen when Rachel played the piano and consciousnesses blended among the dancers and Rachel who also saw buildings. Nancy and Minta touching helps the girls' minds link and inspires the image. The actions of the girls are erotic, and the connection they share propels them beyond the present moment and into a sublime experience.

The vision shared by the girls is not of an unknown place or vague buildings, but a city that Woolf visited in 1906. Urmila Seshagiri in "Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics, and Politics in *To the Lighthouse*," argues that "some of Woolf's most radical literary innovations arise from a material and a formalist politics of race" (59). She claims that one of Woolf's major achievements, "to draw (and redraw) human relationships by lifting the veils separating individuals," is aided by the conversation about race and racial difference. Nancy's and Minta's vision shows a connection between a non-Western place and their merged mental plains, which shows Woolf interacting with difference in a manner that destabilizes imperialism. The girls do not see London, but a city in Turkey. The inclusion of a non-Western city at this particular moment indicates the ability of the characters to move behind the structure of their culture and engage with something different. The girls connect the moment with "the whole world" and "life"

meaning that the city must symbolize those images for them. From the mist of life grows a city, and through the touching of hands they both see it.

The scene undercuts imperialism, but the touching hands of the girls indicate that the use of the city also reflects what Karen Kaivola claims in "Revisiting Woolf's Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation" is her tendency to associate the East with transgressive sexuality: "In her letters and her fiction, Woolf regularly invokes Eastern ('oriental') imagery to code gender and sexual irregularities as erotic and exotic" (248). Constantinople, in particular, is associated with lesbian sexuality due to the scenes in which it is referenced: Clarissa Dalloway reflecting on her relationship with her husband references Constantinople, as does this scene with the girls. The mention of the city in the scene indicates that slightly more than just a sublime moment is occurring. Woolf is linking it to sexuality. Previously scenes have discussed sexuality, but this scene is particularly explicit in connecting the sublime to sexuality.

Lily experiences more frequent and prolonged moments of sublime than Nancy--moments that differ radically from Burke's vision of a solitary traveler on a mountain. Elizabeth Grosz, a queer/feminist theorist who writes about the natural world in artistic creation and the pleasurable vibrations of the world, is a more useful guide than Burke to these moments. She claims that "'in the beginning' is chaos, the whirling, unpredictable movement of forces, vibratory oscillations that constitute the universe. Chaos here may be understood not as absolute disorder but rather as a plethora of orders, forms, wills" (5). Chaos is omnipresent and anything artistic is created from the vibrations of the world (Grosz 6-7). The wanderer stands on the top of the mountain experiencing the forces of terror and the inability of his mind to comprehend the vastness of the space. The

vibrational forces of the universe move against the individual to incite feelings that might be associated with the sublime. Lily during her sublime moment does not just transcend, but creates something out of that chaos. Initially when she begins a painting, she feels only terror: "before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body" (Woolf 158). But then her body and soul work with the waves of feeling around her in order to pull together the piece she wants. She begins in her creation process to find a rhythm: "And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another" (Woolf 158). As she paints, her connection to the vibrations of the world strengthens: "her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things" (Woolf 159). She feels the humming undulations of the world in her artistic creation process. Lily's trance-like painting shows her connection with chaos. Lily's artwork grows from the connection with chaos. Rather than feeling terror at seeing a object in the world, she connects with the vibrations of the world and experiences a purely mental rush of overwhelming creative energy. Her rhythmic painting connects her character to the pulsating rhythms of the world.

According to Freeman, Burke implies the figure masters the sight that inspires the sublime, an implication that also suggests a distinction between the subject and its object. Grosz, on the other hand, suggests the inanimate environment has a physical impact on a character's body through a "plethora of orders, forms, wills" that exist in the world (5). Grosz argues that the relationships available in the world are numerous and not limited to

a singular experience of the wanderer. This idea continues to help with the next scene examined, when Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* feels a connection with the light from the lighthouse. Watching the light she feels "fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight" (Woolf 65). Mrs. Ramsey experiences awe and terror at the scene of the light, and her response also shows the depth of the light on her person. Dominance in the scene does not really exist. Mrs. Ramsey's connection with light continues: "she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!" (Woolf 65). The lack of boundary between Mrs. Ramsay and the light, and the lack of the mastery indicate that the experience has changed at this moment. Mrs. Ramsay connects to the chaos as Lily does through the rhythm of the light of the lighthouse. The light and Mrs. Ramsay both connect to water or water imagery as the light "swelled and broke upon the beach" like a wave, and Mrs. Ramsay feels waves of pleasure in her mind. Although primarily mentioning the mind, the relationship between the body and mind is sensual. The stroking fingers of the light with the crying of "It is enough" imply a bodily, pleasurable response to the lighthouse. Doyle, when examining the scene, finds that Mrs. Ramsay's connection to the light does not transcend the heterosexuality of the character. Doyle does concede that the scene is focused on female sexuality. However, it does so in a manner, she says, which still reflects the heterosexual patriarchy that Mrs. Ramsay belongs to with the power play

present in the scene (Doyle 53). I would argue that the lack of dominance in the scene does break the heterosexual patriarchal society in which Mrs. Ramsay resides. Mrs. Ramsay's embodied response shows Woolf straying even further from the concept of the sublime originally conceived by Burke, but does not break ultimately the power dynamic of the scene.

Woolf begins in her early work, *The Voyage Out*, to show the sublime as an experience very similar to what Burke defines and the painting of the wanderer shows, but as the novels progress, Woolf strays farther from this version of the sublime as she depicts these moments of intense response. The sublime moments are never just about the sublime but grow to encompass other aspects such as artistry, consciousnesses that overlap, and sexuality. *Orlando* will continue this transformation of the sublime. The "plethora of orders, forms, wills" appears in *Orlando* to show the multiplicity available to mankind once the mastery Freeman associates with the sublime disappears (Grosz 5).



## Chapter 3

Queering the Sublime in *Orlando*: A Union of the Natural and Human World

What does one do with a novel that starts when Queen Elizabeth I is on the throne and ends with the publishing of the work, includes a biological gender change, bends to the conventions of the age, and is dedicated to a romantic interest of the writer? One could be shocked by the sheer amount of material covered in *Orlando*. The tone of the novel helps the reader to absorb the situations that *Orlando* presents, as it is playful and accomplishes all that it attempts in good spirits. The voice of the novel, in part, helped Woolf avoid the censorship that occurred with *The Well of Loneliness*.

With its biological gender change and the character's love interests, the plot of the novel goes against what Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and others present as the reality of the homosexual. *Orlando* confronts human sexuality and gender construction in the same playful, fantastical tone that aided Woolf in evading censorship. At the same time, Orlando refuses definition by the concepts that sexologists supply. An example of inversion might appear in the novel, but it does not stay for long, as the gender switch complicates the idea of a masculine soul in a female body. How does one define a soul's gender when the body has undergone a biological gender change? After Orlando changes gender, she contemplates her sex in terms of her love life, realizing "though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved" (Woolf 154). Sexologists would label Orlando an invert, but the situation of the character implies a critique of the term. Orlando was a man and then biologically a woman making it impossible to classify an individual's soul based on that fact. In addition, Orlando loves a woman then marries a man, so the character's choice of lovers complicate the sexologist's construction of

homosexuality, showing not the clearly defined actively invert character but a convoluted sexuality and gender.

In order to evade the understanding of sexologists about inversion in *Orlando*, Woolf employs the sublime, a literary concept, but adapts it by introducing sensuality and insisting on the connectedness of all elements in the situation. She began in *The Voyage Out* with scenes of a traditional sublime, which included the elements of terror, infinite, and distance best captured by Caspar David Friedrich's painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. Woolf in *Orlando* shows Orlando fascinated with the traditional sublime when the narrator describes Orlando's "disease," a love of nature, which has her climbing mountains and walking the countryside. Orlando during one climb, sees "the tarn on the mountain-top and almost threw herself in to seek the wisdom she thought lay hid there; and when, from the mountain-top, she beheld far off, across the Sea of Marmara, the plains of Greece, and made out (her eyes were admirable) the Acropolis with a white streak or two, which must, she thought, be the Parthenon, her soul expanded with her eyeballs" (Woolf 138). The depth of the water in the mountain lake, the distance seen in the vision, and the awe from the height establishes a sublime moment. But more frequently, Woolf presents in the course of *Orlando* moments that experiment with the concept. She places Orlando in scenes where the character experiences euphoria through the power of movement toward pleasure. The character's experience, if completed, leads to a creative expression.

Orlando evades titles such as "homosexual," "heterosexual," "female," and "male," and does so in a fun, non-threatening manner. Radclyffe Hall ends her novel *The Well of Loneliness* with a plea for the world to accept the invert with all the flaws and

problems that s/he presents and seems to celebrate her character's self-sacrifice in releasing her lover from the bounds of unsanctioned homosexual love. Instead of directly addressing societal constraints, Woolf, in contrast, creates a fantastical world where the human body follows the pleasurable course presented to it, while still confronting societal norms regarding sex and gender.

With its dedication to Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* invites discussion of the relationship between Woolf and Sackville-West. In his biography of his mother and father's marriage, *Portrait of a Marriage*, Nigel Nicolson describes *Orlando* as the "longest and most charming love letter in literature," thereby demoting the novel from literature to an extension of the affair between two women. It is common for scholars to use the biographical information to understand *Orlando*. In 1988, Sherron E. Knopp discussed the connection between the novel and Woolf's relationship to Sackville-West by claiming:

. . .the extent to which Vita and Virginia did love each other--profoundly and, in every sense of the words, erotically and sexually (the frequency or infrequency with which they went to bed is irrelevant)--is something that continues to be resisted, denied, ignored, qualified out of significance, or simply unrecognized, even by the feminist revolution that has enshrined Virginia as its saint. . .Critical discomfort with the novel mirrors biographical discomfort with the relationship. Those who dislike *Orlando* complain that it is too deeply rooted in Vita's life to have general appeal. (24-25)

Since Knopp, most scholars have read the novel as both a component of Woolf's attachment to Vita and a work worth examining as more than a part of said relationship. Knopp enabled the sexuality of the novel to enter the academic conversation and provided a space for others to examine the novel's sexual complexities.

Sexuality in *Orlando* is now addressed by academics who deal openly with its lesbian themes. Leslie Kathleen Hankins, in "*Orlando*: 'A Precipice Marked V' Between 'A Miracle of Discretion' and 'Lovemaking Unbelievable: Indiscretions Incredible'," bluntly calls *Orlando* a lesbian novel and argues, "Woolf's lesbian narrative in *Orlando* suggests love and erotics between women, mocks compulsory heterosexuality, challenges homophobia, and slips coded lesbian signatures and subplots into the novel" (181). Hankins focuses on the mockery and codes that Woolf used in the novel in order to avoid censorship such as Hall experienced. She also follows Knopp in discussing the relationship between Woolf and Sackville-West in relation to the novel, going so far as to use letters between the women to decode it; she takes Knopp's reading of *Orlando* and applies the biography more literally to the novel. In the process she addresses the novel's eroticism.

Other scholarship looks at *Orlando*, not as biography piece but as a critique of gender norms. Writing of sexology, Adam Parkes, in "Lesbianism, History, and Censorship: *The Well of Loneliness* and the Suppressed Randiness of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," links the *Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando* saying of Hall's use of sexology, "Hall effectively situated *Well* within that discourse. In contrast, Woolf's *Orlando*...mocks all normative sex and gender codes, destabilizing the very grounds on which sexological as well as legal conventions were founded" and thus "[interrogates and

transforms] the discursive practices that constructed lesbianism in Hall's novel and in the 1928 trial" (2-3). Parkes, comparing *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando*, finds that *Orlando* challenges the ideas of the sexologists, but in so doing he does not address the body directly and lacks the sexologist's emphasis on the scientific examination of the female body. Instead of the body, Parkes's reading of *Orlando* emphasizes the characters' performance of gender through clothes and behavior.

Nancy Cervetti also examines the character's dress in terms of Judith Butler's idea that gender is performative. The clothing in *Orlando* can either match the character's sex or obscure the biological gender of the wearer. Cervetti claims that with the play of gender as shown by clothing, "Orlando uses identity as a practice and performance, disrupting not only the categories of male and female, but the concept of category itself" (171). The disruption that Cervetti finds in *Orlando* stays grounded in clothing, and disregards the sensual experiences of the body. Clothing clearly plays a part in the experience of gender for Orlando as s/he cross-dresses and uses clothing to hide or show his/her gender, but for Cervetti the sexual expression of the body itself is removed from the lighthearted attitude about clothing found in the novel.

Clothing can be seen as destabilizing virtually everything in *Orlando*. Christy L. Burns, in "Re-dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," finds that "in her novel truth is destabilized and turns into parody through an emphasis on period fashions, cross-dressing, and undressing of 'essential' bodies" (343). Burns suggests *Orlando* uses clothing to explore whether or not individuals have a core essence or are completely shaped by society. All these critics agree that Woolf uses clothing to emphasize the performativity of gender and to show

that clothing does not have to define or match biological sex, nor is it a clear indication of sexual orientation. Valid as these points are, the clothing arguments tend to ignore the physicality of the novel, instead focusing on the farcical role of clothing and disguise in relation to gender.

*Orlando* critiques not only gender, but also about biography itself, a genre Woolf was familiar with as her father was a well-known Victorian biographer. Leslie Stephen, Woolf's father, worked on the *Dictionary of National Biography* from 1885 to 1891. Woolf would have been familiar with the genre as a method of remembering and glorifying the great male figures of the past, and by writing what claims to be a biography, she invokes that connection and mocks it by creating a fantasy character who lives for four hundred years and changes genders. The novel also exists as a literary history; the time period that *Orlando* exists in reflects the writing style of that time and shapes the actions of the character. The spirit of the age influences Orlando's decisions as s/he moves forward through time. Both ideas operate in the opening section of the novel. The reader is introduced to Orlando as a young man swinging a sword at the head of a "Moor":

His fathers had been noble since they had been at all. They came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads. Were not the bars of darkness in the room, and the yellow pools which chequered the floor, made by the sun falling through the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the window?...Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one. Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to

glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following  
 after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their  
 desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career.  
 (14-15)

The mention of the biographer defines both the work's genre and time period. The subject is the perfect individual for the biography as he is a powerful male figure, which is made clear by both the family's crest and the character's energy and pride. The novel as whole continues to examine Orlando's life from the standpoint of the biographer, even as Woolf manipulates the form to expose its limitations.

Woolf thus accomplishes many ends with *Orlando*: homage to her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, a literary history, historical text, and a stab at her father. She also manages to comment on the state of humans in relation to the inanimate and natural world around them. Society has constructed an environment where humans have a place and everything requires definition, but what about experiences that defy definition as socially understood? Orlando as a small boy writes plays and poems but is stuck when he attempts to convey the right shade of green. Woolf writes, "Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces. The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre. Moreover, nature has tricks of her own" (16-17). Woolf's ability to write of nature and the natural world clearly counters this statement of antipathy, but the boy Orlando's need to put into words the correct tone of green pushes language too far; any word he chooses restricts the power of nature by classifying it. Orlando is not able to write in manner in which he would wish because he has not yet

experienced the inspiration required. He has not experienced what Elizabeth Grosz describes as "the productive explosion of the arts from the provocations posed by the forces of the earth" (*Chaos* 2-3). Orlando is writing inside away from the earth and removed from the creative forces and cannot capture the color green in his poem.

Frustrated by his inability to write in the manner he would like he walks to a place where he can look over his family's property. The implication is that he owns the view and some of the land on the death of his father--this being Elizabethan England, where property runs through the male line. And he is often described standing on a height looking down on his property: the fear and infinity associated with the sublime are established with the character's position "very high, so high indeed that nineteen English counties could be seen beneath" (Woolf 18). The inclusion of this moment in the novel establishes Woolf's interest in the sublime. But the sublime moment does not inspire the "productive explosion of the arts" (Grosz *Chaos* 2-3). In order for Orlando to write anything, he must have the correct inspiration and experience. As he stares at the scene, Orlando ponders the ownership of the land, thinking: "The heath was theirs and the forest; the pheasant and the deer, the fox, the badger, and the butterfly" (Woolf 18). His thoughts move from the distance of the scene on the hilltop to the animals, which belong on it. As they grow smaller in scale, his mind moves from the traditional sublime moment, and then abruptly the scene changes for a different experience. Creation comes from the experience I associate with Woolf's experimentation with the sublime:

He sighed profoundly, and flung himself--there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word--on the earth at the foot of the oak tree. He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine



beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be; or, for image followed image, it was the back of a great horse that he was riding; or the deck of the tumbling ship--it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt the need of something which he could attach his floating heart to; the heart that tugged at his side; the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales every evening about this time he walked out.

(18-19)

Orlando's body falls to the ground and connects to the tree in a motion filled with desire. Victoria L. Smith, in "'Ransacking the Language': Finding the Missing Goods in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," ties Vita Sackville-West to ship imagery, an association that adding to the scene's sensuality. The physical experience of the moment continues as Orlando's connection to the world around him slowly falls away. The oak tree stimulates the event. The text focuses on the heart to lead the reader out of the structured society into a natural world associated with both sensuality and solitude. Orlando's connection to the tree helps him push past the current state of the world around him. As he lies there:

gradually the flutter in and about him stilled itself; the little leaves hung, the deer stopped; the pale summer clouds stayed; his limbs grew heavy on the ground; and he lay so still that by degrees the deer stepped nearer and the rooks wheeled round him and the swallows dipped and circled and the dragon-flies shot past, as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer's evening were woven web-like about his body. (19)

His consciousness and body connect with the natural rhythms around him. The web surrounds his body as an accumulation of the sensual link Orlando has with the natural

world, marrying the experience of the mind with that of the body. Slowly the mind merges with the body as the character is rendered immobile, and the web associated with reproduction and love exists as evidence of the carnality of the moment. The world is not about what he owns anymore or how dominating or powerful he feels looking at property but about connecting to the pulsing, throbbing natural environment of the world. Grosz proposes that the world is created from chaos or that it surrounds us and operates as the background of everything--vibrational forces in constant motion. From that chaos all life forms itself. Life is juxtaposed to chaos (Grosz *Chaos* 5-6). Orlando is able to connect with the chaos around him in order to create something.

Although Orlando does not return to the attempt to describe green, he does, over the course of two years, write "twenty tragedies and a dozen histories and a score of sonnets" (Woolf 23). From the experience of embodied consciousness, the character is able to artistically express himself whereas before he was stuck on the words to express a color. The written works express what Grosz describes as "the productive explosion of the arts from the provocations posed by the forces of the earth" (*Chaos* 2-3). Orlando was provoked by the natural world to a creative explosion of artistic energy.

Grosz sees art as evidence of two movements in human evolution: first, art itself is evidence of the progress of humans; and second, art is produced as part of sexual selection. Sexual selection, the means by which one member selects another due to attraction not necessarily for copulation, sparks what is required for art's formation out of the chaos. At the root of this is sexual difference, which displays itself through sexual display, but the appeal of one individual to another is never addressed in terms of gender for Woolf or Grosz. Grosz relies on theories of evolution, which require male and female

pairs in order to propagate a species. Grosz limits her own reading by gendered or a needed heterosexual in order for creation to occur, but Woolf undercuts both and still produces artistic products (*Chaos* 6). For example, when Orlando first sees Sasha he cannot tell which gender she is:

A figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity. . . But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind. He called her a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow all in the space of three seconds--he did not know whether he had heard her, tasted her, seen her, or all three together. (36)

The sexual difference in this moment is not important: Orlando is attracted to the figure. The scene shows not only the sexual selection process, but also the way his chosen mate attacks his senses. Sensation and pleasure are part of what individualizes a human, animal, or living thing from the chaos, and leads to the creation of art (*Chaos* 6-7). Orlando is assigning strange items to his new love, this figure to whom he is sexually attracted, not out of a desire to associate her with inanimate objects but to link her to all the powerful sense reactions she is giving him. Woolf explains, "For though we must pause not a moment in the narrative we may here hastily note that all his images at this time simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy" (36). He is reacting to his sense impressions with sense memory from boyhood. The sensation of sexual attraction creates chaos.

Grosz explains, "There is much 'art' in the natural world, from the moment there is sexual selection, from the moment there are two sexes that attract each other's interest and taste through visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory sensations. The haunting beauty of birdsong, the provocative performance of erotic displays in primates, the attraction of insects to the perfume of plants are all in excess of mere survival" (*Chaos* 7). Art grows from the excess of production and ornamentation animals develop to attract others to them, but the attraction does not have to involve procreation; instead it evolves toward pleasure, which humans view as art. The excess sensation created by sexual selection becomes a part of the chaos or background vibrations of the world until it is pulled from there to create art. Grosz defines art as follows: "Art proper, in other words, emerges when sensation can detach itself and gain an autonomy from its creator and its perceiver, when something of the chaos from which it is drawn can breathe and have a life of its own" (*Chaos* 7). Grosz is, of course, not saying that literature, paintings, music, or sculpture breathe; instead she is claiming that art is art when it elicits sensations of its own and stands independent of its creator. Van Gogh's sunflowers do not require his body or consciousness for the viewer's attraction to be gained for the painting. Orlando's attraction to Sasha is not a creation of something from the chaos or art, but the attraction or pleasure that Orlando feels for her and the sensory exploration of that feeling are due to the evolution of individuals, which enables that moment to happen. Excess in nature creates art. Grosz's theory linking art and nature also links the sensual body to the vibrations that surround the world as sexual attraction helps create the oscillating forces.

By having sexual bifurcation included in the creation and definition of chaos, Grosz's theory appears to reinforce the separation of the genders, instead of creating a

space free of the distinction. Grosz herself addresses the issue by examining the dyad of nature and culture. In her essay "The Nature of Culture" she claims, "I am interested in the ways in which nature, composed of the biological and material, organic and inorganic systems that sustain life, incites and produces culture, that is, the ways in which biological enables rather than limits and directs social and cultural life" (*Time Travels* 43). She claims that she is not interested in deconstructing the binary of nature and culture or reinforcing it; instead she discusses the ways nature informs culture. One of the many ways that Grosz claims nature should inform culture is with: "pure differences, differences for their own sake, experimentation with no particular aim in mind" (Grosz *Time Travels* 51). Grosz sees in the natural world, variation or differences meaning that the attraction involved in the sexual selection is not limited to heterosexual relationships nor does that restrict the gender definition to male and female. The sexual attraction that manufactures chaos can have the same range of options as the natural world, where difference occurs with no goal. Orlando, in his/her sexual selection and biological gender change, is an individual, whose sexuality follows that of the natural world's multiplicity, instead of the categories of the sexologists.

*Orlando* shows the multiplicity of nature when, after a suitor leaves, Orlando writes, "Life and a lover" then proceeds to change dresses and jewelry. After catching her reflection in the mirror, the following scene takes place:

Even Orlando (who had no conceit of her person) knew it, for she smiled the involuntary smile which women smile when their own beauty, which seems not their own. . .this smile she smiled and then she listened for a moment and heard only the leaves blowing and the sparrows twittering. .

.whipped her pearls from her neck, stripped the satins from her back, stood erect in the neat black silk knickerbockers of an ordinary nobleman (178)

Orlando's experimentation with dress shows the character playing with ornamentation and its role in sexual attraction. Orlando first dressed as a woman, but then rejects the clothing in favor of male attire. The character plays with attraction and whom she would like to attract with her outward appearance, which evades sexologist's understanding of gender and sexuality, but also shows the excess sensation that composes chaos does not need to come from a heterosexual pairing as Grosz supposes. Art comes from the animal world; the connection of the artistry to the animal or natural world is apparent.

Ornamentation for the purpose of sexual attraction in the animal world provides the excess sensation that creates the chaos, and Orlando's dress shows a diversity of options and "differences for their own sake" (Grosz *Time Travels* 51). When Orlando chooses to cross-dress and go into London, where she meets a prostitute, she is again showing the variety that one would expect to find nature (Woolf 205-207). Woolf in her fantastical novel attempts to show a culture that is informed by the natural world. Reproduction is not the end goal of any mating that might happen as they are two women, but the emotions, sensations, and waves that Orlando feels guide her to that place, and the variation mimics the natural world. Out of the profusion of differences produced in nature, the artist is able to create.

Orlando's connection to the natural world, and his/her ability to connect items not related through his sense memories show the character's disregard for categories, which appears in a moment when she observes the natural world. After the biological gender

change, Orlando travels with gypsies. During this time, she wanders through the landscape, making poetic comparisons about what she sees:

She likened the hills to ramparts, to the breasts of doves, and the flanks of kine. She compared the flowers to enamel and the turf to Turkey rugs worn thin. Trees were withered hags, and sheep were grey boulders. Everything, in fact, was something else. . . Then, looking down, the red hyacinth, the purple iris wrought her to cry out in ecstasy at the goodness, the beauty of nature; raising her eyes again, she beheld the eagle soaring, and imagined its raptures and made them her own. (138)

Orlando sees the world not merely as it is, but a place where objects and lines are not always concrete. Previously when unlikely items were linked together, it was a connection linked to pleasure; Sasha was connected to a pineapple, an emerald, and a fox due to Orlando's happy association of the items (Woolf 36). By once more linking articles together--hills to breasts of doves, flowers to enamel, and sheep to grey boulders--and with the end of the scene as a release of pleasure, the connections indicate the same response. The comparison in this passage also shows Orlando associating items regardless of their position in the world. Flowers are not connected to another plant, their products, or color but to an inanimate decoration, which shows a blatant disregard of categories.

*Orlando*, in addition, to all of its other elements is the story of an artist. From the time he is a small boy to the end of the novel in 1928, s/he writes. The masterpiece that s/he holds onto for the duration of the novel is "The Oak Tree." The physicality of the experience is expressed in her sexual pleasure on viewing the flowers and eagle. Orlando

after her proclaims, "Oh! if only I could write!" then proceeds to make ink from berries and write on the old manuscript (Woolf 140). From her connection to the pulsing oscillations of the forces surrounding her, she writes. Her use of nature in the act shows the extreme inclination she has to write, but also the excess in nature, seen in the flowers and eagle, required for creation.

Birds are frequently mentioned at crucial moments in *Orlando*. Grosz frequently mentions them to reference the extra sensation that culminates in the chaos as birds sing to attract mates and have beautiful feathers for the same. When Woolf mentions birds of various kinds it usually indicates that out of the moment creation will occur. When Orlando is enveloped in the web by the oak tree, he sees rooks and swallows. In the previous moment, the eagle was seen as a physical embodiment of the moment. After Orlando connects to the bird--for Grosz, a symbol of sexual attraction--she creates. The representation of sexual attraction for the human is art and springs from the same place that birdsong does.

Birds turn up again when Orlando is traveling by boat to England, she tries to decide which is the better sex--male or female--and the benefits of one over the other. Since the gender switch, Orlando is in a unique position to make the decision. When the captain offers to help Orlando: "a delicious tremor ran through her frame. Birds sang; the torrents rushed. It recalled the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she has first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago. Then she had pursued, now she fled" (Woolf 149). The birds and torrents indicate that something greater than just an offer occurred, as does the shiver of pleasure that runs through her body. The sexual pleasure sparks both her body and mind and she experiences a purely sensation-driven moment. Orlando's



understanding of her sexuality as connected to the natural world is triggered here, and her thought filled with bird's song is at the root of the scene. The reference to Sasha shows how sexually charged the moment is. Pleasure guides Orlando to the space associated with birds--emblems of the sexual selection and art--and the vibrational forces of the background. Grosz similarly links pleasure to both nature and art:

What music and the arts indicate is that (sexual) taste and erotic appeal are not reducible to the pragmatic world of survival, although of course subject to its broad principle as a limit: they indicate that those living beings that 'really live,' that intensify life--for its own sake, for the sake of intensify or sensation--bring something new to the world, create something that has no other purpose than to intensify, to experience itself.

(*Chaos* 39)

Orlando is capable of really living as s/he intensifies existence just for that reason, as does art. She experiences the moment as an immersion in intense feelings, as what Grosz calls "experimentation with no particular aim in mind," a feeling of attraction and sexual stimulation whose product is feeling, not copulation (*Grosz Time Travels* 51). The birdsong and "torrents" link the pleasure evoked by Sasha's name to the natural world. The captain in the scene pursuing Orlando could possibly ruin the queerness of the scene, but Orlando's mention of Sasha undoes the scene's heteronormativity.

Orlando's connection to nature's multiplicity is sometimes tainted by the historical period that Orlando lives in. In the eighteenth century, her cry was "Life and a lover," but with the dawn of a new century with new rules, she desires a husband. Her left hand twitches with a need for a ring. She longs for a husband but does not know anyone who

will marry her or anyone she wants to marry. As she lists the people she knows that she could seek out for a match or comfort, birds play in the background. Orlando spies them flying together. They are mated and she is not, compounding her sorrow at not having a match. The birds continue to take part in her sorrow as she begins to walk the ground attached to her house.

Orlando collects fallen feathers from the birds as she walks, an activity which slowly enables her to touch once more the oscillating forces of the world. As she follows the birds, collecting their feathers, she trips and falls. As she lies on the ground of the moor "the scent of bog myrtle and the meadow--sweet was in her nostrils. The rooks' hoarse laughter was in her ears. 'I have found my mate,' she murmured. 'It is the moor. I am nature's bride,' she whispered, giving herself in rapture to the cold embraces of the grass" (Woolf 237). The scene of Orlando on the moor is sometimes read as a parody of *Wuthering Heights*, and while the association of the scene with novels written around the time period that Orlando currently occupies is valid, it also radiates sexuality in connection with the natural world. Her senses are all involved in the moment, and her response is to call the natural world her mate. The scene is sensual also as she mentions while she lies on the moor, ships linked to a lesbian sexuality (Woolf 238). Her connection to birds in the section reminds us of Grosz's discussion of creativity and the excess sensation of sexual attraction that makes up chaos. Orlando's primal response to the moment reflects the erotic space from which art comes from.

After Orlando experiences this moment, she marries Shelmerdine, the man whose sexual identity Orlando wonders about, and whose name inspires the memory of the rooks and her moment on the moor (Woolf 239-240). Both Orlando and Shel have an

ambiguous gender as they claim to both be the opposite gender than they appear. By associating the characters with both genders, Woolf emphasizes the infinite variations found in nature. The married Orlando wonders, "if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage?" (Woolf 252). She worries about the consequences of writing while married, but as an individual so connected to the natural world, and her body, she has to write. The spirit of the age and her sexuality, however, affect her artistic expression. The poem that she writes mentions girls, and the spirit of age forces her to ponder "are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that'll do" (Woolf 253). The time period that Orlando exists in pressures her to submit to certain rules. A husband is one of the said rules that she must submit to, but Orlando also gets around the rules:

For she was extremely doubtful whether, if the spirit had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have had to pay the full fine. She had just managed, by some dexterous deference to the spirit of the age, by putting on a ring and finding a man on a moor, by loving nature and being no satirist, cynic, or psychologist. . . to pass its examination successfully.  
(Woolf 253)

Orlando's sexuality does not fit the restriction of the age, instead matching nature's show of variation for the sake of it. Orlando might appear to match the age's requirements, but internally she expresses nature's asset: variation. But in order to write, Orlando must balance the demands of the time period with her own desires. She claims that she exists "in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, no submit to it; she was

of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write" (Woolf 254). Orlando once more expresses what Grosz calls "the productive explosion of the arts from the provocations posed by the forces of the earth" (Grosz *Chaos* 2-3). From the moment she is affected by the forces of the natural world, she uses the excess sensation of the world to produce poetry.

The end of the novel sees a return to the oak tree, and a ceremonial burying of Orlando's manuscript. Orlando claims that she buries the manuscript "as a tribute. . . a return to the land of what the land has given me." (Woolf 309). Orlando returns to the scene of inspiration in order to give back some of what the earth has inspired in her. Orlando's acknowledgment of where her creative stimulus comes from reinforces the claim that creation for Orlando is tied to the natural world. She continues to include the environment in her reflection by connecting her present view to the past: "Here the landscape shook...itself, heaped itself, let all this encumbrance of house, castles, and woods slide off its tent shaped sides. The bare mountains of Turkey were before her" (Woolf 311). She reflects on her creative inspirations blending with the past moments, which is why she mentions Turkey and returns to the oak tree. Her remembrance also sparks physicality, shown in her crying out of "Ecstasy" as she remembers her husband Shel, who is presently sailing.

The invoking of her husband does not indicate that she is now merely aroused by the mental image of Shel; she associates Shel with both same-sex attraction and with creativity. She connects him with ships invoking Vita Sackville-West and lesbian sexuality, and with birds. For after she calls his name, "The beautiful, glittering name fell out of the sky like a steel-blue feather" (Woolf 312). These associations once more

invoke the differences produced within nature and the creativity of sexual display. To make the variety even more clear in the scene, Orlando mentions pearls, a metaphor for the clitoris and a common item for Vita Sackville-West to wear. Kathryn Simpson, in "Pearl-diving: Inscriptions of Desire and Creativity in H.D. and Woolf," discusses the continuation of a tradition where pearls are used to inscribe female sexual pleasure. Simpson claims, "The writing of H.D., Woolf and other women modernist writers continues to appropriate the implicit eroticism of pearls and other precious gems, and to exploit the range of associations of such gems in order to encode sexual pleasure and desire between women" (37). The mention of symbols linked to female genitals and lesbianism does not define the scene as homosexuality; instead, it, in combination with a mention of Shel, emphasizes the multiplicity that Orlando represents and a queer space where all boundaries disappear.

The climactic ending begins with Shel appearing and a bird flying over his head, a sight to which Orlando cries, "It is the goose!" (Woolf 314). Leslie Hankins argues that geese flying in formation make a "V," which is a letter with numerous associations for Woolf, including how she and Sackville-West would sign their letters. There is one bird mentioned (195-199), but Hankins claims Orlando's exclamation is a sneaky code that evokes the geese flying in a "V" without directly stating it (199). The suggestion of lesbianism associated with the bird, and Shel appearing once more indicate the multiplicity of options available to the character intimately linked to the natural world.

The final sentence of the novel states, "And the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight" (Woolf 314). This ends the novel definitively with a date

and time. The reader will not ever know beyond that point. Although the reader will not see the creative move that appears next, the novel's ending focusing on a bird in flight reinforces "the productive explosion of the arts from the provocations posed by the forces of the earth," (Grosz *Chaos* 2-3) in the novel and in Orlando's life as well as the reflection of nature in her life with "differences for their own sake" (Grosz *Time Travels* 51).

The character Orlando's ability to sensually connect to the natural world displays the ability of that environment display difference for the experience or experiment. Orlando's connection to female, male, and natural mates--the moor--indicate an attempt on Woolf's part to incorporate difference in the character, in addition, to the figure's biological gender change. S/he is not an invert nor can the character be defined by the categories established by the sexologists. Orlando not only defines their definitions surrounding female homosexuality, but her/his acceptance of the body and its sensuality does not equate with their understanding of female sexuality. *Orlando* shows a fantastical world where nature and culture are not set in opposition to one another, but one emerges from the other, and they inform each other. Orlando as a character occupies a space that allows for her or him to allow pleasure to lead the way, which may or may not produce a product. The sublime experience, traditionally about the relationship between a subject and an object and the distance placed between the viewer and the scene, adapts and changes as Woolf writes of an embodied consciousness and inspiration without mastery.

Chapter 4  
Conclusion

To characterize the moments I see in *Orlando*, I'd like to introduce the term "queer" sublime. The queer sublime as I use it is a moment when the character connects to the natural world, is inspired by emotional feelings usually sensual, and evades social definition in order to create something. The product is not a part of the experience but a consequence of the moment. The queer sublime is also still a solitary event, as is the sublime in Friedrich's painting, but without the sense of mastery that Freeman identifies as inherent in the sublime. The independent nature of the moments relates to the traditional sublime, but the queer sublime completely eradicates the position between subject and object.

I use the word "queer" instead of "feminine" as Barbara Claire Freeman has done in order to take into account Judith Butler's warning that "Gender theory...would misidentify the construction of the feminine within a masculinist economy with the feminine self, thereby effecting a complicity with the socially given modes of masculine and feminine and forfeiting the critical distance required for a feminist contestation of these constructions" (21). David Halperin defines queer theory as a helpful alternative: queer theory, he says, "has pursued the task (begun long before within the sphere of lesbian/gay studies) of detaching the critique of gender and sexuality from the narrowly conceived notions of lesbian and gay identity; it has supported non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, encouraging both theoretical and political resistance to normalization" (341). Using the word "queer" instead of "feminine" places the term along side Halperin's definition of queer theory as it resists normalization and binary thinking.

Elizabeth Grosz, in *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, dismisses binary terms for gender and sexuality and creates a new manner of thinking about bodily experience. Grosz states, "What I propose here is a sketch or outline of an ontology, not of *subjects* and their *desires*, but of *forces* and *actions* which produce subjects and pleasures as their crystallized forms" (*Time Travels* 186). She argues force is not an individual exerting control over another, but "force provides us with a way of thinking pleasure and power, the psychical and the social as terms leveled by that which runs through them" (*Time Travels* 187). By thinking of the body as something that has force and seeks pleasure, one can begin to see the queer sublime in *Orlando*, where force could be seen as present due to Orlando's fluid movement from one gender to another and his/her ability to discover pleasure where s/he will.

The natural world to Grosz is always moving toward pleasure in ways that overlap and extend human bodily experience. She also insists on the inseparability of art from nature. Art for her is tied to sexual display. Similarly, Woolf sees artistic inspiration as an experience involving the body, brain and natural forces. The forces and experience of nature all work together to move an individual toward experiencing a queer sublime moment.

Grosz believes that art forms from the excess sensation created from the sexual attraction created by the sexual selection process. Grosz presents a contradiction in her theory of the creation of art by reinforcing a separation of the genders that must be present in sexual selection. But her theory about the forces of pleasure replaces the subject exerting power over an object, which shows a space void of binaries. Grosz claims that humanity has a choice:



Either we can subscribe to a theory of the subject which strives to have its identity through relations, especially relations of desire but also relations of identification or recognition, with other subjects...Alternatively, we can subscribe to a theory of the impersonal...in which inhuman forces that are both living and nonliving, macroscopic and microscopic, above and below the level of human are acknowledged and allowed to displace the centrality of both consciousness and the unconscious. At the very least, this means that there are wills, forces, powers that can be ascribed no humanity, no life, but which have "their" perspectives... (*Time Travels* 189-190)

Grosz presents a theoretical choice where a subject can exert a will in order to create identity, or one can allow forces not always human to dictate action. In attacking the subject, she is also attacking the binary reinforced by the subject. Grosz claims that she does not want to occupy a space between the terms of the binary nor deconstruct it, but instead "the subordinated term needs to be reconsidered as both the condition of the dominant term and as occupying its heart or center" (*Time Travels* 47). The forces acknowledge both subjects and objects, and it removes the idea of a human exerting power over a scene of the nonhuman in order to affirm a sense of self. When Grosz claims, "The productive explosion of the arts from the provocations posed by the forces of the earth," she is not reinforcing a binary understanding of male and female or subject and object, but claiming that the forces of pleasure engage an individual, human or nonhuman, in creating art with the help of the natural world (*Chaos* 2-3).

Sexual attraction places pleasure, desire, and sex at the center of Grosz's theories. Havelock Ellis did not see the sex lives of his subjects as particularly important in understanding the invert. When he does address the sexual nature of the women, it is rarely sensual. In the case of Miss H, he claims, "She finds sexual satisfaction in tenderly touching, caressing, and kissing the loved one's body. (There is no *cunnilinctus*, which she regards with abhorrence.) She feels more tenderness than passion. There is a high degree of sexual erethism when kissing, but orgasm is rare and is produced by lying on the friend or by the friend lying on her, without any special contact" (226). Miss H also claims that she does not like taking the active role (226). The description of Miss H's sex life does not exude sensuality; instead it shows a woman who does not follow pleasure, but remains the object waiting for a subject. Ellis is restating information that he gathered from Miss H, which makes one wonder if she did not express her sexual life truthfully, but there is also an aspect of female sexuality shown in the passage. Miss H does not place importance on the orgasm, instead valuing the pleasure attained from the caresses and kisses of her lover. In the absence of the active and passive figure in Miss H's sex life, one can see the pleasurable forces at work, and the sensation required for art in the sexual attraction between the two. At the same time, Ellis with Miss H does reinforce the 19th century understanding of sexuality with the mention of Miss H's dislike of assuming the active role. The assumption that one must play the active or male role in the sexual actions between women reinforces the Victorian conceptualization of sex, and the separation of subject and object. In addition, the emphasis on tenderness of feeling instead of an allowance for the female sexual pleasure attempts to ignore the ability of

Miss H to experience pleasure. Ellis ultimately inscribes in the lesbian sexual experience the ideas of his time, including the subject's need to exert power over the object.

The sublime relies on the power of the individual to experience a heightened sense of being through the use of an object. In Friedrich's painting, the wanderer uses the scene of mountains in order to achieve the sublime. The traditional sublime as read by Freeman uses an object of any variety--person, item, or natural scene--to incite the moment for the subject of the scene. Grosz advocates for the removal of the strict understanding of one subject exerting will over another; instead, she explores how they fuse together for the same end. The use of Grosz's claim in terms of the sublime asserts that a kind of sublime can occur without the power of one individual over an object. The object and subject blur together in order to achieve a queer sublime moment. Ellis and Burke both inscribe on their theories an idea of male sexuality that relies on the passive participant in the action, whereas, Grosz and the queer sublime capture a symbiotic relationship between the participants - either human or inhuman.

The natural world opposes the human world in the traditional version of the sublime. The wanderer in Friedrich's painting is not among the trees and rocks of the mountain top, but standing on a rocky cliff overlooking the natural world. Grosz claims that, "Nature came to be understood as timeless, unchanging raw material, somehow dynamized and rendered historical only through the activities of the cultural and the psychical orders it generates." She goes on to say that culture "became the active force molding and reworking nature to make it amenable to individuals" (*Time Travels* 45). In the traditional sublime, nature was controlled, and mankind was dynamic in its progress and growth. Grosz argues that culture grew from nature so they should both be equally

vibrant and ever changing (*Time Travels* 45-51). The conflation of the two concepts is another way in which Grosz critiques and complicates the sublime. Ellis in his study of inverts desires to fit female sexuality and lesbian relationships into the understanding of sexuality that prevailed at the time, but the queer sublime moves instead to merge what Ellis saw as the opposing forces of female sexuality, passive, and male sexuality, active. The figure in the throes of a queer sublime moment does not actively seek it out nor express power over anything, nor occupy the position of object.

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