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# CONSTRUCTING VITA & VIRGINIA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the role of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928) in constructing the public's perception of Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, respectively; and analyse the impact these had on the conception of *Vita & Virginia* (2018), the homonymous film adaptation of Eileen Atkins's play previously published in 1995.

Woolf's creative process in terms of the construction of her characters follows the lines of Modernism and is well portrayed in some of her essays, as well as her own diary or her acquaintances' perception of her personality. Both novels, according to Woolf herself, are based upon her own experience and Vita Sackville-West's life, epitomised by Lily Briscoe and Orlando respectively. Hence, this work attempts to analyse the influence of these two novels, as well as the life that surrounded both the authors and the characters, on *Vita & Virginia*.

**Key words:** Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, characterization, portrayal

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## RESUM

Aquest treball explora el paper de les novel·les de Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) i *Orlando* (1928), en la percepció pública de Woolf i Vita Sackville-West respectivament; i analitza l'impacte de les dues obres en la concepció de *Vita & Virginia* (2018), l'adaptació cinematogràfica de l'obra teatral homònima d'Eileen Atkins publicada al 1995.

El procés de Woolf per crear els seus personatges segueix les línies dels preceptes del Modernisme, molt ben plasmats tant en molts dels seus assajos, com en el seu propi diari o la percepció que tenien altres persones d'ella. Aquestes dues novel·les, segons Woolf, estan basades en la seva pròpia experiència i la vida de Vita Sackville-West, i són personificades per Lily Briscoe i Orlando respectivament. Per tant, aquest estudi pretén analitzar la influència d'aquests personatges, i la vida que els envoltava, en *Vita & Virginia*.

**Paraules clau:** Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, caracterització, representació

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses mainly on two of Virginia Woolf's best-known novels, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928). More accurately, on the protagonists of the novels—Lily Briscoe and Orlando, respectively—as the characterization versions of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. The aim is to seek whether these portrayals could have had an impact on the characterization of the same historical personae in the film *Vita & Virginia* (2018).

*To the Lighthouse* is a novel that revolves around a family and the events that surround them, inspired by Woolf's childhood experience. Thus, many critics, such as Albright (1984), consider this novel an almost-autobiographical account of Virginia Woolf's life. In the light of this reading, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay would represent Woolf's parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, and Lily Briscoe, Woolf's innermost feelings and thoughts.

*Orlando* is a novel about the adventures of a poet who lives for more than 300 years and eventually changes sex from man to woman. It was inspired by Vita Sackville-West, as Virginia Woolf stated in her diary entries—found in *A Writer's Diary* (1953), edited by Leonard Woolf—and Sackville-West's correspondence with her—compiled in *The letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf* (1985) by DeSalvo and Leaska.

*Vita & Virginia* (2018) is the film adaptation of Eileen Atkins's homonymous play that was published in 1995 and which revolves around Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West's friendship. Atkins used the correspondence between Woolf and Sackville-West as an inspiration for her play. In an interview in *Charlie Rose*<sup>1</sup> in 1995, Atkins—who also played Virginia Woolf in her play, and had previously played her many times before—declares to have read more of Woolf's work, including *To the Lighthouse*<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, Vanessa Redgrave—who played Vita in the play—had only read *Orlando*. Hence, this could have also had an impact in the conception of her novel and in the production of the latter film, for which Eileen Atkins, together with Chanya Button—who had also read Woolf—wrote the screenplay. Therefore, both screenwriters were familiar with Woolf's novels in question, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, so the portrayals of the protagonists are very much alike in several aspects.

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<sup>1</sup> An American talk show hosted by Charlie Rose.

<sup>2</sup> Which she read for the cassette edition of "Penguin Twentieth Century Classics".

## 2. Woolf's writing process

Following the lines of Modernism, Woolf rejected any realist assumption in her writing process. Modernist writers attempted to “render human subjectivity in ways more real than realism: to represent consciousness, perception, emotion, meaning and the individual's relation to society through interior monologue, stream of consciousness, tunnelling” (Childs, p.3). That is, Modernists explore the individual as a complex, fragmented, and unstable self that encompasses many realities. According to Lodge (1987), Virginia Woolf exhibits most of the characteristics that define the Modernist movement; in general, her work is experimental, it portrays inward consciousness, it presents open beginnings and ends, and it rejects chronological order (p.482). In fact, Woolf explicitly declared her position towards writing and, hence, character construction in her articles “Modern Fiction” (1921) and “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” (1924).

At a personal level, Woolf showed herself as someone who liked to closely observe people. Apparently, she often analysed every move people made and every word they spoke. Dame Janet Vaughan—one of her close relatives—states that Woolf enjoyed knowing the details of other's people's lives and, in fact, “she would speculate about the people one met” (Stape, p.11). Thus, Beatrice Webb even considered Woolf to be “a clever artist in personal psychology” (Stape, p.31). William Plomer argued that she enjoyed autobiographies, for she had “a passionate precision in collecting data about society” (Stape, p.143). Her personality and appreciation for biographies, then, was key to her Modernist position towards character-construction. She carried out an in-depth analysis and portrayal of her own characters, in the same manner that she enjoyed observing people and their lives. She provided an accurate and intrinsic representation of the human mind and life, of all those inner and complex traits that subjects have within themselves. In fact, “almost all her stories had one point, one object: to catch the unique living self that makes one human being different from another” (Stape, p.158). In addition, as Schulkind (1978) points out, thanks to *A Writer's Diary* and Quentin Bell's biography of Virginia Woolf it is widely known that her personal relationships fostered entire novels (p.27). *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* are a clear exemplification of such a fact, since the former is based on her own personal experience and the latter, on her friend's. The representation of the main characters that this study is going to focus on—Lily Briscoe and Orlando, respectively—follow such lines of character building that have been addressed.

As a matter of fact, Woolf explicitly addressed the issue of character building in her essays “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown”. In the former, Woolf argues that there are two types of writers: the materialists and the spirituals. Materialists such as Arnold Bennett “are concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (p.158). They pay attention to the surroundings and the aspectual aspects of the individual, rather than focusing on the individual itself. In Woolf’s opinion: “they write of unimportant things; they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (p.159). For her, what they do does not have a point, for life is far from being like they portray. On the other hand, spiritualists such as James Joyce are “concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain” (p.161). They focus on the millions of thoughts that occur to “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (p.160). Hence, this group no longer focuses on the physicality of characters, but on most inner parts. In “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf further analyses this distinction by exploring two generations of writers: Edwardians (materialists) —referring to authors such as Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy— and Georgians (spirituals) —authors such as Mr. Forster, Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot. Once again, Woolf objects that Edwardians “were never interested in character in itself” (p.9). She claims that they “laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there” (p.16). Georgians, on the other hand, portray characters of “unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what” (p.21). All in all, Woolf does not seem to approve of the materialists/Edwardians’ form of building characters. In the same manner as the spirituals/Georgians, she “was concerned not with creating fictional characters but with discovering and "recreating" real personalities” (Cooley, p.71).



### ***3. To the Lighthouse***

According to Woolf, the purpose of *To the Lighthouse* is “to create a detailed portrait of the father, mother, St. Ibec Island, my childhood and all things without which my novels can’t be – life and death” (Woolf, 1978, p.112). Hence, the novel serves as an account of her life and her experience in which Virginia Woolf’s counterpart is Lily Briscoe. This novel offers a parallelism between Lily Briscoe and Virginia Woolf in terms of their relationship with the Ramsays and the Stephens, respectively, and their attitude towards their work and life.

As previously mentioned, “the background of the Stephen household is resurrected by Virginia in her novel” (Stape, p. 152). One of the clearest and most explicit representations in the novel regarding Woolf’s life is the characterization of her own parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen in the shape of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Both Leslie and Mr. Ramsay share a stoic personality as their most characteristic trait. Bell (1972) accounts that Woolf’s father used common sense as a façade to hide his own vulnerability (p.19). In several occasions Mr. Ramsay tries to hide his most vulnerable and sensitive side, for him not to lose his reputation. An instance of this is when he controls his emotion and only half smiles when he is reading a book in the presence of other people in the room (p.132). In the same manner that Mr. Ramsay is portrayed in the novel, Woolf’s father was “bold [...] had plenty of moral, physical and mental audacity” (Bell, p.19). Mr. Ramsay is a writer, and he is often seen in the novel carrying activities such as writing, reading, or discussing books with other characters. Leslie Stephen was also an intellectual, so it would be accurate to picture him in Mr. Ramsay’s place. In opposition, Bell (1972) also claims that Woolf’s mother’s family “were an altogether less intellectual race than the Stephens” (p.19). Mrs. Ramsay is shown in such comparison with her husband throughout the novel. In fact, it is explicitly stated that, for instance, “she could not follow the ugly academic jargon” (p.14). Moreover, Julia Stephen and her counterpart lived exclusively to fulfil their husbands’ needs. Mrs. Ramsay, for example, had to put up with all his anxieties about his books or his quarrels with his fellow writers. Woolf’s mother also “had to listen to and partake in [Leslie’s] worries about money, about his work and his reputation [...]” (Bell, p.38). In general, despite the differences between her parents’ counterparts, the atmosphere of the household in Woolf’s book is lovable and comfortable. This is nothing far from Woolf’s own reality, as Quentin Bell acknowledges

that “the happiness of the Stephen home derived from the fact that the children knew their parents to be deeply and happily in love” (Bell, p.38).

It is not only the representation of the pair as individuals that the novel revolves around, but it is also Woolf’s “relationship with her father and mother which lies behind *To the Lighthouse*” (Schulkind, p.27). As previously stated, Lily is Virginia Woolf’s counterpart in the novel. Hence, by analysing Lily’s attitude towards the Ramsays, the characterization of her own parents also tells readers about Woolf’s own personality. Lily’s character can be placed somewhere in between Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay. Lily does not share the same values as Mrs. Ramsay, but she is not the entire opposite of her. Although she does not follow the current social norms, she often tries to behave as she is expected, especially when Mrs. Ramsay is around. At the same time, even though she does not celebrate his behaviour —up to a point in which she refers to him as an “egotistical man” (p.44) — she has a “profound respect for Mr. Ramsay’s mind” (p.18). In the same manner that Lily Briscoe continued to develop in the shadow of Mr. Ramsay, Woolf “grew up in the shadow of her eminent, querulous father, reading every book she would lay hands on” (Stape, p.152). All in all, similarly to Lily Briscoe, Woolf recognized that she was somewhere in-between her parents, for “she was the heiress to two very different and in fact opposed traditions” (Bell, p.18). Furthermore, Lily’s admiration for both Ramsays is present throughout the novel, despite the many differences they all share. An illustration of this, as Albright (2002) states, is the struggle Lily Briscoe faces when trying to “realize an image of her love for the Ramsays by painting it on canvas” (p.14). She even explicitly states how deeply in love she was with the scene she finds herself part of (p.23). Similarly, when recalling a particular scene from her childhood in which she is surrounded by her family, Woolf (1976) declares: “I’m pleased” (p.97). Due to her love for the Ramsays, especially for Mrs. Ramsay, readers witness Lily’s grief in the last section of the novel. She does not only grieve Mrs. Ramsay’s death, but also Mr. Ramsay’s. Woolf had also to endure the loss of her mother and her father’s sorrow, as he was “the chief mourner” (Bell, p.40). Hence, “Lily grieving openly for Mrs. Ramsay some ten years after her death —which would be in 1924, about the time Virginia Woolf conceived this novel” (Munca, p.280). Lily analyses her feelings towards the Ramsays, at the same time that Woolf analyses those she had for her own parents in the writing process of *To the Lighthouse*. Feeling sympathy for Mr. Ramsay and sorrow for Mrs. Ramsay’s death is the parallel of Woolf’s attempt to “getting over her anger and forgiving her parents, her

mother for dying abruptly and leaving her alone and her father for demanding too much of her” (Munca, p.284). Woolf successfully achieves her goal by writing the novel, as Lily’s last utterance “I have had my vision” (p.235) well illustrates. Hence, both Lily and Woolf manage to finish their artworks, and they come to terms with their own feelings about the Ramsays and the Stephens, respectively. In fact, Woolf (1976) declared that the presence of her mother ceased to obsess her when the novel was finally written (p.93-94).

Apart from the parallels between Lily’s feelings towards the Ramsays and Woolf’s relationship with her parents, they also share their attitude towards their work: their working process, their struggles and the outcome of the work. Lily is presented as rather focused on her work all the time, observing everything that could be inside her painting and considering effecting potential changes to it. While the rest of the characters are having a fluent conversation, she is thinking about her painting and deciding what she should do next. In fact, she decides that “she would move the tree rather more to the middle” (p.113). In her diaries, as it can be verified in *A Writer’s Diary* (1953), Woolf obsessed about her books all the time. More often than not, Lily looks rather than intervene in conversation; she prefers to analyse everyone or think about her own painting, up to a point that she ends up “losing consciousness of outer things.” (p.180) Similarly, rejecting reality, other people were “expected to live up to the character that Virginia had invented” (Bell, p.148). Stape (1995) argues that Lily “would not generalise, she would always particularise” (p.157). That is, she focuses on every small detail around her, instead of settling for an overview of the scene. Woolf also did this when writing: she focused on details about people, and used such information in order to bring personality to her characters and novels. Throughout the novel, Lily struggles with her painting mostly because of her lack of self-confidence. At one point, for example, Lily expresses that her painting was so bad that she could have cried (p.54). Similarly, Albright observed that in Woolf’s diary the phrase “I’m a failure” appeared on various occasions (p.2). Thus, Albright describes Lily Briscoe as “a personification of self-denial, a state of abnegation fitted out in a skirt and a wide-brimmed hat and made to apologize continually for her inferiority” (p.14). As a product of this feeling, Lily does not like her pictures to be looked at. Even though Woolf had published many novels, she still had trouble accepting bad reviews. Nevertheless, painting and novel are finished at the same time, as both artists are able to overcome the difficulties faced in the work process. The novel’s

last sentence “I have had my vision” (p.235) represents Lily’s achievement, as well as Woolf’s; for, as previously analysed, they finish their artworks at the same time.

Virginia Woolf, like Lily Briscoe, rejected patriarchal Victorian values that were still well rooted in their societies, in terms of their position in society as well as their own unique personality. In this manner, the conflict of the Victorian housewife versus the modern female artist is addressed in this novel. By devoting their lives to the arts, both Briscoe and Woolf were already defying the archaic values present in their times that are illustrated by the Ramsays and some other characters. Mr. Ramsay is a clear personification of such values; every time he approaches Lily, she is unable to paint. He kept “bearing down on her” (p.168). This passage reflects Woolf’s belief that her father was a threat to her creativity, to her freedom as a writer (Munca, p.282). In fact, in one of her diaries, Woolf declared that “his life would have entirely ended mine. [...] No writing, no books; - inconceivable” (Woolf, 1953, p.119). Both women, then, have to face personifications of the patriarchy that act as a barrier between them and their work. Moreover, Mr. Tansley’s “women can’t paint, women can’t write” also petrifies Lily during her creative process. This idea is recalled by Lily many times over the novel, which affects her productivity; it is another reason she is troubled.

In *A Room of One’s Own* (1928) Woolf had referred to the many difficulties women had to face when writing, for instance. All in all, the effect Mr. Ramsay’s and Mr. Tansley’s words have on Lily could be a declaration of the ideas that she had; that society’s social norms created barriers for the development of women as artists. Not only Lily and Woolf’s focus on their creativity went against the social norm, but their personalities, too. They rejected the code of conduct that assigned certain roles to women and some to men. This code of conduct for women is personified by Mrs. Ramsay, while Lily constitutes the opposite of it. Even though Lily knows this code, she decides not to follow it through and refuses to go for sympathy for men when they ask for it. However, she is not always able to do this, for she is practically forced by Mrs. Ramsay to be nice to men, as the following quote states: “as the glance in [Mrs. Ramsay’s] eyes said it, of course for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment — what happens if one is not nice to that young man there— and be nice” (p.103). In the novel, therefore, “Woolf’s struggle with the Victorian prejudices on the role of women in the society and in family life are touched upon with a specific vehemence and bitterness” (Munca, p.278). Furthermore, both women share similar personality traits that also defy

the norm. Throughout the novel words such as “independent” (p.20), “cold” (p.115), “aloof” (p.115) and “rather self-sufficing” (p.115) are used to describe Lily. She is incapable of connecting with other people; in fact, she does not seem close to anyone in particular. Moreover, she was 40 and is not married. Woolf got married at 29, a rather late age at her time. In relation to this, she stated: “to be 29 & unmarried —be a failure —Childless —insane too, no writer” (Bell, p.176). Perhaps that is why, even though she was not normally described as cold or aloof, she had that perception of herself and portrayed her counterpart in the novel as such. All in all, Lily Briscoe is not the representation of Woolf’s personality per se, but of Woolf’s anxieties about herself.

#### 4. *Orlando: A Biography*

“Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman” (1953, p.116), Woolf wrote down on her diary on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1927. A month later, she revealed in her diary that “[*Orlando*] is based on Vita, Violet Trefusis, Lord Lascelles, Knole, etc.” (1953, p.119). Thus, her imagined Orlando was an aristocrat that had been born in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in a country house which was very similar to Knole —Sackville-West’s family country house. Apart from Woolf’s explicit revelation on whose life *Orlando* is based, the relation between Sackville-West and her fictional counterpart is almost as explicit: they share a similar social background, a quite peculiar personality, and an equally peculiar romantic life.

“Woolf laughs throughout much of the book, yet she is serious in her attempt to capture the reality of Vita Sackville-West” (Cooley, p.73-4). The novel is based on everything that Sackville-West was and everything that surrounded her, with a special focus on her condition as a member of the aristocracy. Both her and Orlando come from a privileged upbringing, which provide them with estates, wealth, and social status. The many portraits that appear throughout the novel illustrate such privileges: from the very beginning of the book, readers are offered portraits —which were not cheap, and only some could afford— of Sackville-West’s ancestors, showing off the family’s well-off background. These portraits do not only help in constructing Orlando as a character, but they explicitly connect the subject with Sackville-West; by using her image, the inspiration behind Orlando is revealed. As Fourmaies argues, “no one can doubt that Orlando is Sackville-West, especially not when the photographs are taken into consideration” (p.37). Nevertheless, even though Orlando did belong to aristocracy, he “was by birth a writer, rather than an aristocrat” (p.56). Being a writer is what best described Orlando, not his social status provided by his birth. Similarly, Sackville-West also defied social norms —perhaps not those applied to social classes, but those related to gender roles— by committing to being a writer, since a woman was not expected to do so. With her father’s death in 1928, Sackville-West had to face the permanent loss of Knole: because she was a woman, the estate passed on to her male cousin. Such loss is illustrated in the novel when, having turned into a woman, Orlando’s “estates were put in Chancery and her titles pronounced in abeyance while the suits were under litigation” (p.119). Unlike Sackville-West, Orlando eventually does get back “the undisturbed possession of her titles, her house, and her estate” (p.182). In other words, Knole was

restored to Sackville-West thanks to *Orlando* (Porter, p.112). By making Orlando keep all her belongings, the author is paying tribute to her friend and tries to return what should belong to her. Such attempt made Sackville-West emotional and replaced the grief the loss involved, as she wrote to Woolf in October 1928: "You made me cry with your passages about Knoles, you wretch" (2001, p.243).

Vita Sackville-West had a characteristic personality that did not follow the canonical social norms for women at her time. There is actual account of Sackville-West having tendencies to "masculine" behaviours, up to the point that she created a male alter ego. Addressing these peculiar conduct, Violet Trefusis —Sackville-West's lover—, in one of her letters to her, argued that Sackville-West constituted "a masculine interior beneath a feminine exterior" (p.207). In exactly the same manner, in the novel it is stated that Orlando "combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace" (p.88). Moreover, Sackville-West did not only show "masculine" qualities, but she did cross-dress as a man in several instances under the name of Julian:

Sackville-West narrates her experience as a cross-dresser in a journal that was posthumously published in her son's biography of her, *Portrait of a Marriage*. To appear publicly with her lover, Violet Trefusis, Sackville-West dressed as a man and took a man's name, Julian. On several occasions, she passed for a man in England and France, dining and dancing publicly with the woman she loved. (Sproles, p.159)

Therefore, Sackville-West's counterpart is not only an attempt at capturing her most "masculine" side, but an illustration of what she actually did: as Orlando does by the end of the novel, she cross-dressed whenever she pleased in order to fulfil a certain activity. In fact, the normality that surrounds Orlando's transformation and cross-dressing in the novel illustrates how usual this was for both subjects; even though they changed their external appearance, they remained fundamentally the same: "Orlando had become a woman —there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando had remained as he had been" (p.96).

Orlando's fondness for cross-dressing is closely related to her<sup>3</sup> romantic life, up to a point that it affects her most intimate relationships; the duality that the disguises

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<sup>3</sup> The feminine pronoun to refer to Orlando is chosen here because she is addressed to as a woman for a longer part of the novel, and to avoid any confusion.

provide her with, entail a broader and more ambiguous love life —with lovers ranging from one sex to the other and a rather queer marriage. Short before meeting Shelmerdine, Orlando comes to the following conclusion: “Everyone is mated except myself. [...] [I] am single, am mateless, am alone” (p.175). Although having known men and many women” (p.176) throughout her life, Orlando feels lonely and in need of a partner. The relevant thing here is that these anxieties “had never entered her head before” (p.175) until that particular period of time —the Victorian age—, and she marries Shelmerdine. The same thing seems to happen to Sackville-West, whose marriage to Harold Nicolson is addressed by Johnston as “a marriage of convenience” and “self-ghosting” (p.61) and could be seen as a form of covering her actual sexual orientation. In addition, Orlando wonders whether the age would approve of her marriage, for they spent too much time away from each other. Similarly, Sackville-West and Nicolson’s marriage was unusual because both parts allowed the other to pursue other affairs, as Nigel Nicolson explains in *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973). The people that Nicolson and Sackville-West courted were usually from the opposite sex, so the transformation that their counterparts undergo could be Woolf’s attempt to capture their dual essence as individuals. In Woolf’s time, a woman that loves women would be seen as rather masculine, whereas a man that loves men, somewhat feminine. Thus, to illustrate this, Woolf also made Shelmerdine experience a change of sex, of which readers are made aware when Orlando exclaims “You are a woman, Shel!” (p.178). Furthermore, Orlando’s and Sackville-West’s most personal relationships are affected by their split personalities —between the feminine and the masculine. As Knopp (1988) argues, both the character and the poet have two different faces: one is the “brutal” part that loves Sasha/Rosamund with intense passion; the other is the “seraphic” side that sticks to 19<sup>th</sup>-century standards of female behaviour and marries Shelmerdine/Harold Nicolson (p.30). These two types of relationships are clearly differentiated in the novel, and so does Sackville-West, who “distinguishes quite emphatically in her diary between the ‘companionship’ that was the main ingredient in her attachment to Harold and the ‘passion’ she felt for Violet’s predecessor, Rosamund Grosve” (Knopp, p.31). In sum, neither Orlando or Sackville-West —nor Shelmerdine or Nicolson— fit in the typical gender roles; they are androgynous individuals, whose sexuality is somehow ambiguous.

Readers must not forget that, even though the character accounts for Sackville-West, it is also an illustration of Woolf’s perception of her friend, as well as an account



of Woolf and her own desires. Sackville-West, for Woolf, was a woman that had some qualities that —according to their era— were intrinsically male: she slept with women, travelled with no male companion, drove, wrote, etc. The fact that she cross-dressed was the epitome of such behaviour, and Woolf —or anyone close to Sackville-West— was used to it. Hence, that would explain the naturalness surrounding Orlando’s transformation and cross-dressing, for not everyone in their time would have thought of these acts as something natural. Nevertheless, even though Orlando was based on her friend, Woolf was invested in “discovering and ‘recreating’ real personalities” (Cooley, p.71). She “wanted to go beyond facts, beyond the "granite" of Vita's personality” (Cooley, p.75). Therefore, she used biological facts and characteristic traits from Sackville-West, and employed invention and fiction at the same time by using her own perception. In this manner, *Orlando* is not only an account of Sackville-West, but of Woolf as well: “Virginia saw in Vita the spectacular image of herself, of Virginia the lesbian lover. She invents the lesbian woman who loves women, who might love her, whom she might love” (Meese, p.108). Thus, Orlando shapes the Sackville-West that she saw and experienced, and, at the same time, the individual whom Woolf herself longed to resemble:

We could say that Virginia saw herself and not herself, herself as she wished to become (that is, a woman like the Vita she saw), herself as she wished Vita to see her (a woman Vita could love), and Vita as Virginia wished her to be, the one who puts Virginia on the "first rung of her ladder. (Meese, p.111)

## 5. *Vita & Virginia*

As previously stated, this project aimed to analyse the impact that *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* had in the portrayal of the protagonists of Chanya Button's production *Vita & Virginia*. The film is named after Eileen Atkins's play, which focuses on Woolf's and Sackville-West relationship. Together with Button, Atkins contributed to write the script; hence, the film holds a close relationship with its original manuscript.

Even though both play and film are based on the correspondence between the authors, both Atkins and Button admitted to have previous knowledge on Woolf's work, which had an influence on their writing process. On one hand, Atkins had repeatedly played Woolf in several plays and, hence, she had a previous connection with Woolf's work, as she explained in her interview with Charlie Rose. Furthermore, she read *To the Lighthouse* for the cassette edition of the novel in 1995, for the collection "Penguin Twentieth Century Classics". On the other hand, Button declares herself a "huge fan of Woolf" (TIFF Talks, 2018, 01:05), after explaining that Woolf had always been her favourite writer. They did not only read the letters Woolf and Sackville-West had sent one another, but some of their work as well. In fact, the film for Button (2019) "required an intimate knowledge of their letters, their biographies, their novels that both Vita and Virginia wrote." In "Orlando, David Bowie and The Pronoun Revolution" (2018), Button explains the influence that *Orlando* had on the conception of her film adaptation. Therefore, there is an explicit impact of *Orlando* on the film and different topics related to Vita Sackville-West evince it.

The impact of *Orlando* on the film is clear: it affects both its general form and the portrayal of Virginia<sup>4</sup> and Vita as characters. This novel for Button constitutes a "fuel" that has been successfully burned in the making of her film:

It is Woolf herself, in that sense, who offered me the tools with which we made *Vita & Virginia*. Tools with which we both honoured her history, and challenged perceptions of her. In the pages of *Orlando*, the details of history become arrows, shot from Woolf's bow at the contemporary reader, to provoke, and to challenge injustice. Woolf simultaneously surgically re-orders a conventional approach to biography, and crystallises Vita Sackville-West's

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<sup>4</sup> In order to be true to the film and to avoid any confusion, Woolf's and Sackville-West's counterparts will be referred to by their first name: Virginia and Vita, respectively.

deepest truths, without ever writing a word about her. We too, attempted to re-order an approach to the bio-pic, empowered by Woolf's own expressionistic approach. (Button, 2018)

Thus, Button tried to use the same devices that Woolf had used to portray Sackville-West: she tries to challenge some popular conceptions about the author, rather than only focusing on her history. Therefore, some aspects regarding Vita Sackville-West's life are similarly portrayed both in the novel and in the film: her social status, her unconventional personality, and her equally peculiar love life.

In the same manner as in *Orlando*, Vita's aristocracy is tackled from the very beginning of the film. Apart from exhibiting Knole every time she visits her mother, she is constantly referred to as an 'aristocrat' by the Bloomsbury group. In fact, Virginia refers to her as "an aristocrat from ancient race" (01:05:05), showing that her status comes from a long tradition. However, just as Orlando's, her aristocracy is not always reflected as something positive, but rather as an annoying trait: in fact, Virginia addresses Vita's actions as "aristocratic aberrations" (17:20) that should not be seriously taken. This aspect is also emphasised by Virginia's analysis of the portraits at Knole: for her, they only provide an outdated touch to the mansion and, therefore, an outdated connotation inherent in aristocracy. The matter of Vita's inheritance is addressed by Vita herself, explaining that she has been cheated out of her home simply because she is a woman due to "stupid ancient laws" (39:16). In opposition to Orlando and similarly to Sackville-West's reality, Vita completely loses Knole and she is devastated about it. Furthermore, along the lines of Orlando and Vita Sackville-West herself, Vita does not follow the code of conduct for aristocratic women by deciding to keep on writing —especially about subjects that can bother the most traditional parts of society, such as her unconventional view of marriage— and getting involved with the Bloomsbury group—who are referred to as "socialists" and "bohemians" (04:50) by Lady Sackville with a disapproving tone.

Sackville-West's characteristic personality that defies gender norms is also present throughout the film, but in a lighter approach than in *Orlando*. Vita's "masculine" conducts are not explicitly addressed at any particular moment; they are implicitly shown in her dressing—while all female characters wear more "feminine" clothes, she goes to more "masculine" outfits— or in her actions—such as driving, taking the lead and seducing women. Sackville-West's cross-dressing in the film, in opposition to *Orlando*, is not shown either. Instead, it is briefly mentioned by Lady Sackville and Vita in a

particular instance, when Vita declares that she had “pretended to be a man when I went to France with Violet to get a copy from my book” (05:20). Thus, the naturalness with which this subject is touched by Woolf in *Orlando* is lost. Even though Vita explains it as something normal, it makes Lady Sackville angry; regarding her cross-dressing and her peculiar love affairs, Lady Sackville calls her a “promiscuous exhibitionist who brings only shame to me” (06:15). This illustrates how her deeds were not accepted by everyone, as it had seemed to be in *Orlando*.

Sackville-West’s uncommon love life is illustrated along the lines of *Orlando*. It is not until the very end of the film that Vita’s innermost anxieties are shown: she is afraid she cannot love in the same manner that most people do by monogamy. This would be a similar approach to Orlando’s worrying about not being in a close relationship with someone else before marrying Shelmerdine. Her unusual vision about marriage—and her marriage as such—is also depicted in the film. At the very beginning of the film, Vita and Harold are having a conversation about marriage for BBC radio delivering an unconventional point of view. Furthermore, Vita’s analysis of marriage goes beyond the one implied in *Orlando*, as she analyses it as a form of being “passed from one line of men to another” (38:34) that tore her apart from her beloved Knole, or merely “a role” (44:20) that one has to fulfil. The peak of their unconventionality is illustrated by the various scenes of the two of them with some of their lovers; in opposition to *Orlando*, in which only Orlando was shown with other lovers, but Shelmerdine was not. However, the only love affairs they actually speak about are Vita’s. In fact, it is mostly Harold who mentions them, reproaching Vita for liking to “have her cake and eat it [...] So many cakes. So many” (18:38); by using this metaphor, he alludes to Gefry, Dorothy, Vita’s French maid, Violet, and Virginia. It is in those moments that Harold’s resentment and insecurities show themselves. To all this, Vita replies: “I don’t question your indulgencies” (45:27), illustrating again that only her affairs are approached in the same manner that in *Orlando*. Furthermore, the two faces of Sackville-West’s love that were addressed in *Orlando* are explicitly mentioned in the film by Harold: “There are several kinds of love. Yours for Virginia constricts, panics, consumes... it is selfish. The other, is an embodiment of everything good in you” (59:08). Both types of love were reported in *Orlando*: one based on passion—the one Orlando feels for others; the other, on companionship—the one she feels for Shelmerdine. Similarly, this duality is emphasised by Vita’s composure around both her husband and her lovers. While a more romantic,

loving background surrounds the former relationship, physicality is what prevails in the latter.

In opposition, *To the Lighthouse* is not an explicit source of inspiration for the film. However, Eileen Atkins —and probably Chanya Button, since she declared herself a Woolf fan— had read the novel, which makes it most likely that it affected their writing somehow. In opposition to the novel, Woolf’s relationship with her parents is not explicitly tackled in the film. Nevertheless, after finishing *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia suffers a mental breakdown; this could be related to her difficulty coming to terms with her feelings towards her parents that was addressed in the novel by Woolf herself. Nevertheless, apart from being briefly mentioned while Virginia is writing it, the film shares some topics regarding Woolf’s personality and thoughts in the same manner: her writing process and the barriers she has to face; her innermost anxieties; and her opposition to Victorian values.

Throughout the film, Virginia is focused on her work —either writing one novel or another, or working for Hogarth Press; that is why she is usually observing and analysing everything around her. However, even though she is engaged in her work, she still has to face trouble during the process. From the very first moment Woolf is portrayed as observing. For instance, when she walks into Knole, she takes a long time to inspect everything to later state her impression of the mansion to Lady Sackville and Vita. In the same manner that Lily from *To the Lighthouse*, she prefers to look rather than intervene in social events. All these observations serve her as inspiration for her novels, as Vita argues to Virginia “I believe you look on everything -on everyone- as copy” (23:16). Therefore, she ends up focusing on details about people. For instance, she tells Vita that she needs to observe her, to take pictures of her and get to know more about her in order for her to write *Orlando*: “I need to see you. Frequently. To sit and look at you. Get you to talk” (01:20:24). She does not settle for her plain answers, but she tries to analyse all of Vita’s answers as part of her writing process. Even though she spends most of her time immersed in her own working process, she still struggles to be successful in her work. Equivalently to Lily, she needs to be left alone in order to be productive: “When there is a cross on that door, she is writing. And everyone is forbidden to disturb her. Even her husband” (21:33). Moreover, she explicitly states that she has had trouble coming up with ideas to write, until something “came to me like a fin coming out of the water” (01:18:13). By the end of *To the Lighthouse* Lily and Woolf had accomplished their own goals —

finishing her painting and realizing her feelings towards her parents, respectively; by the end of the film, Virginia achieves to discover who Vita really is, and that she will never be able to love her as she desires.

Woolf's inherent anxieties related to her work that were stamped in the novel are also present in the film. All throughout the film, Virginia's lack of confidence on the worth of her books is demonstrated by her curiosity about sales, or by her constant need for feedback. At the very beginning of the film, Virginia asks Vita "why do you think your books sell more than mine?" (10:20), perfectly depicting her insecurities about her work. Along the same lines, she believes that Vita did not like *Mrs. Dalloway*, even though she said that she had. Furthermore, she anxiously asks her husband what he thinks of her books after finishing them, and she looks so relieved every time he says that they are excellent. To this, Leonard argues that she "shouldn't be so fearful, especially what I think" (32:20). This is merely because, in general, Virginia has a hard time accepting bad reviews, as Leonard later explicitly addresses: "You just finished a book. You know you'll be thrilled with nerves until reviews come in" (01:31:03). However, alike some characters in *To the Lighthouse*, some people in the film are perpetuators of such feelings, as the instance in which Dorothy tells Vita that her "books sell; [Virginia's] don't" (25:00). All in all, Virginia lacks self-confidence, as she confesses to Vita when she states that she needs other people to believe in her: "Do keep it up; the belief that I have achieved things. I have need of it" (30:05).

Moreover, Virginia represents the impact that the rejection of Victorian values and, therefore, the code of conduct for women that Woolf herself renounced had on her. Along the lines of Mr. Tansley's "women can't paint, women can't write" in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia's doctor fears that "the writing is what brings on the breakdowns. [...] Sometimes women can cope with too much grey matter" (56:13), implying that she should quit writing. However, this uttering is only heard by Leonard, who completely rejects such statement by arguing "what fools we'd be to deny women their voice" (56:35). Therefore, even though the doctor's claim equates to Mr. Tansley's, Virginia is not present in that particular moment. Thus, unlike Lily, she is able to carry on with her writing without constantly worrying about that particular idea. Furthermore, Virginia's personality is also questioned by Victorian values. While Lily in *To the Lighthouse* is constantly referred to as being cold, Virginia is reduced to her "madness" by some characters who always emphasise on her mental disorder. Mrs. Ramsay's equivalent,

Lady Sackville, is the representation of Victorian values and, therefore, a judge of Virginia's behaviour. She is the one that wants Vita to behave accordingly to the norm, and she reproaches Virginia for not doing so either. Lady Sackville calls her a "madwoman whose successful mad desire is to separate people that care for each other" (01:28:40). Not content with only that, Lady Sackville also calls her "obscure" (38:02) and reproaches her for not having children (01:28:48). All this can be easily related to Woolf's real anxieties previously epitomised by Lily, for those words leave Virginia on the verge of tear. In fact, the film illustrates some other preoccupations that were also present in the novel, such as being unable to connect with people in a conventional manner. Virginia explains that something is wrong with her, something disconnected because she is not "quite allowed to desire in the same way as you" (43:36). Woolf's desire for her longed, unreachable personality depicted in *Orlando* is also well illustrated in the film. That particular identity would completely go against the norm —and she would have had to leave everything behind, including Leonard— for it would entail to behave in opposition to the code of conduct for women and be with another woman. In a particular instance, Vita states that "for a different Virginia" (01:09:50), she would go wherever she asked. The sadness in Virginia's reply —"You have this much of me as I have to give" (01:09:59)— exactly depicts her desire to fulfil Vita's plead and become her desired self, but she is not able to because of the influence the norm had on her. All in all, Virginia could be considered the epitome of Woolf's perception of herself, which had already been illustrated in *To the Lighthouse* —and partially in *Orlando*.

## 6. Conclusions

As it has been analysed, *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* opened a window into Virginia Woolf's and Vita Sackville-West's innermost selves, respectively. As previously mentioned, *Vita & Virginia*'s screenwriters —Eileen Atkins and Chanya Button— declared to have been familiar with Woolf's work, and confirmed that the latter had an influence on the conception of the film. Hence, it provided the background for Vita's character. Even though there was no apparent impact of *To the Lighthouse* in the construction of Virginia as a character, there are traces of the topics addressed in the novel regarding Woolf's personality. Therefore, since *Vita & Virginia* focuses on both authors, it seems that it holds a close relationship with the novels in question.

To sum up, *To the Lighthouse*, and especially Lily as a character, serves as an account of Woolf's own life and personality. The portrayal of the Ramsays offer an illustration of two Victorian forces that both Lily and Woolf have to fight, and finally overcome by finishing their artwork. Briscoe offers a glance into Woolf's most inner preoccupations, such as self-confidence, which clearly affect their productivity and daily life. Hence, readers get a glimpse at Woolf's professional and personal identities by analysing Lily as her personification.

Sackville-West herself acknowledged *Orlando* as her own image, for she addresses to the experience of reading *Orlando* as a new form of narcissism: "you have invented a new form of Narcissism, - I confess,- I am in love with Orlando-this is a complication I had not foreseen" (DeSalvo and Leaska, p.289). All in all, the different aspects that Woolf portrayed in the novel seem to be accurate even for the individual in question. *Orlando*'s background, personality, and love life match Sackville-West's essentially in all aspects: both belong to aristocracy, write, have unusual conducts and relationships, etc. However, it must be reminded that *Orlando* is also an illustration of Woolf's perception of her friend, as well as an account of Woolf's desired personality: by portraying the image of Sackville-West, she was also constructing the individual that she would have liked to become.

The impact of both novels on *Vita & Virginia* has been thoroughly analysed in the previous section of this study. Eileen Atkins and Chanya Button —playwriter and film director, respectively; and screenwriters of the film in question— have both declared to have been previously familiar with Woolf's work, and most importantly with *To the*



*Lighthouse* and *Orlando*. These two novels provided them with information for the representation of the protagonists, Virginia and Vita. On the one hand, Button confirmed *Orlando* as a source of inspiration for the film. This novel provides the background for Vita's characterization: Orlando's social status, unconventional personality, and peculiar love life accurately match Vita's. In general, Vita's condition as an aristocrat is a constant variable throughout the film, as Orlando's was in the novel. However, her unconventional personality based on her "masculine" behaviour, and her peculiar love life are approach in a lighter form than they were in *Orlando*, thus illustrating how her actions were not accepted by everyone at that time. On the other, *To the Lighthouse*, although being briefly mentioned, provides the film with the most important topics regarding Woolf's personal and professional selves. For the most part of the film, viewers experience the various barriers Virginia herself had put up during her writing process mostly because of a lack of self-confidence on her work—in practically the same manner that Lily had. In general, her most internal anxieties about herself, clearly triggered by those Victorian values that alike Lily she also refuses, are also arisen. All in all, it could be stated that the novels provide important insights into the two authors' lives and personalities which the film has successfully taken in, considering that both screenwriters were previously familiar with Woolf's work.

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