

Virginia Woolf: Assertive or Introspective?

Virginia Woolf begins her memoir *Moments of Being* with a conscious attempt to write for her readers. While writing her life story, however, she begins to turn inwards and she becomes enmeshed in her writing. By focusing on her thoughts surrounding the incidents in her life instead of the incidents themselves, she unconsciously loses sight of her outward perspective and writes for herself. Her memoir becomes a loose series of declarations of her beliefs connected only by her wandering train of thought. Although *Moments of Being* deals largely with her conjectures, she is not trying to convince the reader of these beliefs' validity since she is so absorbed in the act of writing. What begins as an outwardly focused memoir evolves into Virginia Woolf's exploration of her thoughts and feelings.

Mrs. Woolf begins her memoir in an easygoing, conversational manner by deliberately reaching out to her audience. She states in her first paragraph that she knows many different ways to write a memoir but for lack of time cannot begin to sift through them all and so she simply begins by relating her first memory. Stating that she is not deciding upon a set method and formalizing that she will be informal demonstrates a frame of mind directed outward; it is her attempt to involve the reader in her work. The sympathetic reader feels as if he and Woolf are chatting about her life over a cup of tea. After narrating her first memory she returns to the structure of her memoir, explaining that she could never really succeed in conveying the feelings represented by her first

memory without first describing herself. She notes: “Here I come to one of the memoir writer’s difficulties – one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened” (p. 65). By introducing a difficulty that the memoir writer faces and attempting to overcome it, Woolf shows that she is writing for and to her audience. She is still trying to make her memoir a literary success, an interesting and worthwhile read. This focus upon the reader does not last long, however.

The memoir moves towards a more introspective focus as soon as Woolf finishes explicitly talking to the reader and describing the person “to whom things happened.” She immediately begins to focus on her thoughts and feelings while writing, causing her style to become much more like a personal diary than a letter to a confidant. Rather than focus upon events in her life as a letter to a confidant might, she focuses upon her thoughts and philosophies using events to explore her beliefs.

For example, she briefly describes the guilt and shame she feels when viewing her reflection. This leads her to hypothesizing that it was her molestation by her step-brother Gerald Duckworth that makes her feel so ashamed of her body. Despite the dramatic possibilities inherent in this remarkable revelation, Virginia Woolf detaches herself from it, making it lose its power to shock the reader. One way she does this is to dull the edge with bland words: “I remember how I hoped that he would stop.” Rather than writing something along the lines of “Oh, how I prayed fervently for him to stop,” she uses “I remember how I hoped that he would stop.” As an author she knows very well how to emphasize actions, how to draw the reader closer. Instead she distances both herself and the reader; by now she is simply writing her own thoughts and is not as intent on the

reader. She diminishes this revelation by including another claim immediately following is in her attempt to support another one of her hypotheses, namely “that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago.” A third way that she drains the power from the event is by discounting it as the sole reason that she is ashamed to look in mirrors. She writes, “Though I have done my best to explain why I was ashamed of looking at my own face I have only been able to discover some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I have got at the truth.” She admits that this incident was only a possible reason, and that she feels that it is not enough to explain her shame. Dismissing such a traumatic event out of hand, she shows that she is not writing to sway her audience but is instead writing to express her thoughts.

Virginia Woolf devotes a large portion of *Moments of Being* to her various beliefs. The first belief she presents is the notion that events exist as separate entities and are thus independent of perception. She asks whether “things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?” She then answers this question by stating her belief: “I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and ... that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.” This belief appears later in her memoir, slightly altered, when she names these events of strong emotion “scenes.” Another belief she espouses is that most of life is lived through what she refers to as the “cotton wool.” This cotton wool insulates her from her surroundings to the extent that she names moments of time spent wrapped in the cotton wool her “moments of non-being.” Occasionally she receives great shocks that rip away the cotton wool of daily life and it is these shocks that constitute the active (as opposed to the meditative) portion of her memoir. If Virginia Woolf had focused her memoir on the

events of her life, then she would be writing it for her audience. Instead, by focusing on her thoughts and beliefs she is so deep in her own thoughts that she has little concern left for the reader.

Although most of her writing expresses and explains her beliefs, she is not trying to convince her readers to share these beliefs. Often Woolf herself will denounce her belief as soon as she introduces it. She does this when introducing her theory involving scenes: “This confirms me in my instinctive notion – it is irrational; it will not stand argument – that we are sealed vessels upon what it is convenient to call reality.” She writes both that her notion is confirmed and that it is irrational and will not stand argument in the same sentence. Woolf cannot hope to convince the reader that her theory is true if she disclaims any rationality in it. She admits that it will not stand argument, that it is just her instinctive notion, and so discounts any possible support for it. Another example, previously mentioned, is her casual dismissal of her guess that Duckworth’s molestation of her caused her feelings of shame and guilt. Even though she presents support and examples for her beliefs, she is not actually attempting to sway her reader to agree with them. Instead, she writes her theories to express on paper what is in her mind, it is to formalize her own beliefs rather than to convince anyone of anything.

Some argue that Virginia’s relaxed approach belies an assertive, calculating hand bent on revealing the injustices perpetrated against women. They claim that Virginia’s self-demeaning attitude is the only way a woman in the Victorian age could approach such topics and that a more strong-handed approach would be immediately condemned. In fact, Virginia’s own words seem to imply such a calculation, noting, “yet this is a simple incident; and it happened to me personally; and I have no motive for lying about

it.” Why should she have to explicitly state that she had no motive for lying, they might argue, unless she might be seen as having an ulterior motive? Why should she even defend herself unless it is important that she convinces her readers that it happened to her? The answer may simply be that she is ashamed of the incident and is responding to imagined, or perhaps even real, attacks upon her own credibility. The main weakness in arguing that her memoir is an assertive woman’s attempt to highlight the iniquities suffered by women lies in the content of her memoir itself. Her passage relating Gerald Duckworth’s molestation of her is only a single incident, neatly tucked away in a single paragraph, while the events surrounding the death of her mother are the mainstays of her memoir. Her treatment of the incident involving Duckworth is much more conducive to an introspective reverie than a treatise on discrimination against women in Victorian England. Instead of writing for an external purpose, to express and hopefully change sexism, Woolf is focused on herself. Although the events of her life vividly describe the injustices against women, her focus in her memoir is not to combat these injustices; it is to write down her feelings.

More compelling than an analysis of Virginia Woolf’s intentions, however, her own words clarify her purpose in writing. When she describes writing *To the Lighthouse*, she notes that writing the book freed her from her obsession with her mother. She suggests: “I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.” The act of writing about her mother was therapeutic for her. It is not hard to imagine how much more therapeutic writing her actual memoir was. She writes of the shocks that invade her “cotton wool”: “I make it real by putting it into

words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it give me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me” (p. 72). She explains that it is through writing down her shocks that she both makes them real and takes away their pain. Viewing her memoir in this context, it is no surprise that she writes more to herself than to any audience. The simple act of writing about these shocks is possibly her greatest pleasure.

Although Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* begins with concern for her reader, she eventually gets caught up in her writing and writes on a more personal level. Rather than writing her autobiography to convince the reader of something, she writes a heartfelt, introspective work. In writing her autobiography, she is not searching for reader empathy; instead she is coming to terms with her past.

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