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VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "THE VOYAGE OUT" AS A TRAVEL NOVEL

The present article focuses on Virginia Woolf's first novel "The Voyage Out" (1915). A travel theme is stated from the very beginning, in the title of the work. The goal of our small research is to follow the interconnection between an actual travel (by ship) and a figurative one: the main character, Rachel, starts her self-development when the voyage begins.

The novel starts conventionally as traditional Victorian. The reader plunges into the world where the omnipotent narrator rules, representing settings and characters. The first chapter opens with the description of October London and its citizens. Normal brisk tempo of life is interrupted by two conspicuous figures, Mr and Mrs Ambrose, appearing at the Strand. The characters are moving towards the Embankment to set off by ship, *Euphrosyne*, belonging to Mrs Ambrose's brother-in-law, Willoughby Vinrace, for Santa Marina. When they reach the steamer and go on board, Helen and Ridley are met by Willoughby's daughter, Rachel.

Before the reception of her elder relatives, Miss Vinrace is pretty nervous, as she is obliged to be a hostess and entertain the guests who she vaguely remembers. Her duties are clear, but beneath the surface—conventions of etiquette—there is nothing deep inside, therefore Rachel opens the conversation with the Ambroses by saying: "My father told me to begin ... he is very busy with the men ..."¹

The small talk among relations is interrupted by another of Willoughby's guest, Mr Pepper. In the next scene the reader observes the four mentioned characters eating. Victorian morales are shown through every detail and every word, and naturally, the all-mighty narrator summarizes and comments on an everyday situation where men talk and the ladies' role is a mute discourse, for they, "being after the fashion of their sex, highly trained in promoting man's talk without listening to it",² are accustomed to be absorbed in their

¹ WOOLF: *The Voyage Out*, p. 9

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

own world without showing that, appearing to follow the men's conversation. This female mute discourse is highlighted by the word choice, describing Rachel's manner of speech: "the words rammed down her throat",³ hesitation, "tendency to use wrong words", murmur. All mentioned characteristics are typical for a baby or a child talking. Moreover, through personification of the ship *Euphrosyne* and London ("the great city appeared a crouched and cowardly figure, a sedentary miser"),⁴ an analogy between sounds produced by the vessel ("the ship gave a load melancholy moan") and Rachel's manner of speech, an idea of lacking personality, object-likeness is represented. Besides the language level, this concept is reflected in the description of Miss Vinrace's appearance, shown from her aunt's perspective: a "weak" almost insipid face, made remarkable by "large enquiring eyes",⁵ "the lack of colour and definite outline".⁶ In the conversation with Rachel Mrs Ambrose mentions the last time they met while Miss Vinrace was buying a piano. The music theme is tightly interwoven with conventionalism and mute discourse. In the second chapter this topic is developed: the reader learns details about the standard education of the majority of "*well-to-do girls*"⁷ in the last part of the nineteenth century—the category that Rachel belongs to. An average upper-class lady was taught the rudiments of about ten branches of knowledge; this level of information is compared to the one of an educated Elizabethan male person. The only upside given to such a lady is the lack of any obstacles to develop an in-born talent, if she has one. In Miss Vinrace's case it is music. Having lost her mother at the age of eleven, Rachel was brought up by aunts and the father. The young lady's attempts to think and find reasonable answers to her questions are suppressed by relatives. Her discourse does not differ from any other muted female discourses. She can be easily put among other objects in the home. The only way left to broaden horizons, learn and experience the world is music. Playing music creates an abyss between Rachel and the rest of the world, in this state she perceives other people as symbols. This muted symbolical language of music facilitates communication and enables the lady to

³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

construct her own inner world, the base point to generate subjectivity. Here, a parallel between Rachel's world and the ship is given: "She was more lonely than the caravan crossing the desert; she was infinitely more mysterious, moving by her own power and sustained by her own resources. The sea might give her death or some unexampled joy, and none would know of it. She was a bride going forth to her husband, a virgin unknown of men; in her vigour and purity she might be likened to all beautiful things, for as a ship she had a life of her own."⁸ This description is almost immediately followed by the detailed history of Rachel's upbringing and education. Such characteristics of the *Euphrosyne* as loneliness can be compared with the fact that Miss Vinrace was an only child. All predictions made about the ship (joy, bride, death) are Miss Vinrace's doom *im Kern*. The motive of death is like progression in music. The topic is presented with various degrees of assertiveness in every chapter: various premonitions that haunt the heroes (especially Mrs. Ambrose), various tart and ominous remarks made by characters (e.g. by Mr. Pepper), diverse symbols interpreted as warning signs of irresistible fate (e.g. "the blue flag appeared a sinister token");⁹ it is formulated by different characters in different words and with different emotions.

· 465 ·

In Virginia Woolf's novel (and in others as well), the issue of life and death is strongly connected with the question of moving from the object-like existence to the subjectivity and being.

Rachel's physical birth is not described in the novel but her personality's birth and development are given in a detailed way. We have presented Miss Vinrace's image at the moment when she embarks on the voyage. The first signs (signals) of forthcoming changes are shown through the alterations in surrounding objects (the ship, London ("a swarm of lights with a pale yellow canopy drooping above it ...", viewed by passengers as a "circumscribed mound eternally burnt, eternally scarred")¹⁰ and England ("a shrinking island in which people were imprisoned").¹¹ All habitual concepts now are remote and seen from

⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 12–13.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 29.

the outside. Rachel is taken away from the *mother*-land and carried by water; this process symbolizes birth. This symbolical meaning of journey is emphasized by the following remark: “The preliminary discomforts and harshness, which generally make the first days of the voyage so cheerless and trying to temper, being somehow lived through, the succeeding days passed pleasantly enough.”¹² According to S. FREUD, water is a symbol of birth (“Die Geburt findet fast regelmäßig eine Darstellung durch eine Beziehung zum *Wasser*”)¹³ and departure signifies death (“Das Sterben wird im Traum durch *Abreisen* ... ersetzt”).¹⁴ Moreover, a ship stands for a woman and a flame (light) (die Flamme) stands for a man. The whole scene in the first chapter can be interpreted as fleeing from a father, dying as a young girl and being born as a woman.

The process of birth is accompanied by another one: the sphere of feelings (embodied by music) is partly being replaced by the sphere of thinking, although the second area has a chthonic nature and mostly consists of fixing and defining emotions.

Another source of signals that informs the reader about Miss Vinrace’s destiny is books – read, discussed and quoted by different characters: W. Shakespeare, J. Austen, E. Brontë where questions of marriage and death permanently arise.

The next step towards self-identification and subjectivity is Rachel’s acquaintance with the Dalloways who join the travelers in Lisbon and head for Africa. Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class matron, married to a politician, is the first person Rachel can confide in and voice burning questions concerning relationships. Richard Dalloway’s sudden kiss makes Miss Vinrace experience her emotions, a mixture of fear, desire and shock. The night after the kiss, Rachel dreams of herself “walking down a long narrowing tunnel”¹⁵ and being trapped in this cul-de-sac with a “deformed”¹⁶ animal-faced long-nailed man,

¹² Ibid., p. 28.

¹³ FREUD: Vorlesungen.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ WOOLF: *The Voyage Out*, p. 81.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

"squatted on the floor".¹⁷ Dreams are another symbolical language that Rachel can apply successfully. In this particular vision, if we try to decipher it with the help of FREUD's theory, we see hidden intimate wishes. This personal experience with Richard Dalloway results in breaking the ice between the aunt (Helen) and the niece (Rachel); the arising closeness encourages Helen to assist Rachel to self-educate and see the world. As she understands the need of personal space and distance from familiar surroundings to become herself, she asks Willoughby to allow his daughter to live with her and her husband in Santa Marina. Mr. Vinrace unwillingly concedes his sister-in-law's pleas.

· 467 ·

At the beginning of chapter eight the ship anchors in the harbor of Santa Marina, and as it is said for Rachel it is "a complete change of perspective".¹⁸ The "naïve" point of view inspires introspection and reflection. The next step (after experiencing music and dreams) towards self-definition is a room of her own that Rachel gets in Ambroses' villa in Santa Marina. There is a remark in the first paragraph of the mentioned chapter: "The next few months passed away, as many years can pass away, without definite events, and yet, if suddenly disturbed, it would be seen that such months or years had a character unlike others."¹⁹ Life with the Ambroses has changed Rachel, she has become "more definite and self-confident in the manner than before".²⁰ The fact of having one's private space and a free choice of books gives an opportunity to face one's own personality, for one is not influenced by other people's emotions and thoughts. Moments of silence and rest help to put a boundary between oneself and social roles one has to play, i.e. between the true self and the function. Functionalism is a perspective which objects are viewed from, i.e. when a human being is seen only within social roles that he or she plays the human being loses his or her personality and becomes a human-function. In this way all people are perceived as being interchangeable and as a consequence deprived of a creative impulse that needs a subjective point of view to perceive the world.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

·468· One evening Helen and Rachel take a stroll to the local hotel for foreigners which gives them an opportunity to observe other European visitors. Unseen, the aunt and the niece watch the hotel guests through the windows. When they reach the windows of the Lounge, they are spotted by one of the men there, Mr. Hirst; having revealed this fact, the ladies flee away. Next day during his saunter Mr. Ambrose crosses his acquaintance's—Mr. Elliot's—path, so he has to come into the hotel and meet a party of Englishmen, including Mr. Hirst and Mr. Hewet. On the following day Helen and Rachel receive an invitation to a picnic on Monte Rosa from Terence Hewet. Regardless of Ridley's refusal to join the party for the picnic, the ladies accept this proposal. On Friday Rachel and Helen get acquainted with the English group, having given their consent for climbing Monte Rosa. Among other travellers, there are Hewet and Hirst. These characters turn out to be another “milestone” in Rachel's self-development and personal growth.

Hirst, representing the “pure” male world of fact,²¹ does not give Rachel the knowledge she needs for self-actualisation: although he tries to literally educate her by sharing his thoughts on science and attempting to construct a productive historic dispute, i.e. to involve the heroine in the oppositional discourse,²² this is not the way for a deeper communication that equals an appositional discourse.²³

The only person predestined to complete Rachel's process of becoming a subject is Terence who does not only show interest in the female everyday life and world but, being a writer, also shares the muted female discourse. The communication and building of a relationship between Rachel and Terence parallels the relationship of another couple, Susan and Arthur. The second pair goes through all conventional stages in their relation: they became acquainted in the lounge of the hotel in Santa Marina, made small talk, before sleep she was thinking about his thoughts about her without confessing that she was in love or wanted to get married. At the picnic on Monte Rosa the couple went for a walk and in conversation Arthur admitted his feelings, using ordinary

²¹ The term is introduced by Alice van Buren KELLEY.

²² The term is introduced by Judy LITTLE.

²³ The term is introduced by Judy LITTLE.

formal words. Their happiness bears nothing special, individual and when observed by Rachel and Terence they are compared to a lamb and a ewe. By this parallel, the traditional concept of love is relegated to the level of biological instincts and is deprived of an inner light. After proposal follows an approval of engagement by Susan and Arthur's relatives and the fact is stated publicly. These formalities are shown as a routine and have nothing in common with uniqueness and individuality of feelings.

· 469 ·

Being creative, Rachel and Terence, who aspires to write a novel about silence, are searching for the true meaning hidden in the clichés. The couple has two ways to fulfill this arduous task, either to make up new words or to use a form of muted discourse that is different from the traditional shallow female one.

The development of the love line does not fulfill the readers' expectations as a traditional "happy" end, i.e. the marriage of the main characters, never happens. Rachel dies.

Another sphere where the main character should restate her position is the area of philosophical and theological concepts. In chapter seventeen, all Europeans staying at the hotel and Rachel go to the chapel to listen to a prayer. In this episode Miss Vinrace starts feeling the lack of a true feeling and understanding, her mind is fraught with doubts, whether some power is really hidden behind these cold meaningless formalities.

The sense of end can be interpreted as logical if we follow Rachel's inner travel from objectivity to subjectivity: love can be actualized only in the complete merging of a subject and a universe (another self); the only way to do it is death.

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