

2021

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Recommended Citation

Windfeld-Hansen, Ellie (2021) "Conquering Shame: the Growth of Virginia Woolf's Character in Moments of Being," *Global Tides*: Vol. 15 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol15/iss1/10>

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Conquering Shame: the Growth of Virginia Woolf's Character in *Moments of Being*

In Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being*, the roles of shame, and the related emotions of guilt, dread and humiliation, leave scars on Virginia's consciousness and childhood memories.¹ Yet, these emotions help her confront and ultimately overcome the challenges she faces by strengthening her character and determination to resist judgements against her. Woolf recounts numerous childhood experiences in which she is often unable to precisely describe and fully comprehend the intense and ambivalent emotions she feels. This "ambivalence", or "violently disturbing [Freudian] [and] [emotional] conflict" (MOB 108),² leads her to contemplate the roots of her confusion and analyze the impact of every "knotted or condensed" emotion she detects in relation to the shame she feels from those experiences.³ Woolf similarly explicates her analysis of her emotions in another of her works, *A Room of One's Own*, as she states that she detects "another element which was often present and could not immediately be identified".⁴ This element "had gone underground and mixed itself with all kinds of other emotions. To judge from its odd effects, it was...disguised and complex".⁵ This overlapping of multiple emotions is illustrated through the use of affect, which offers new and alternative ways of depicting emotions and ambivalence. Affect is defined as an embodied emotion, and while there is "no pure or...originary state for affect",⁶ one who is conscious of its effects demonstrates that it represents innate knowledge "other than [and beyond] conscious knowing".⁷ While the term "affect" was coined after her time, Woolf nevertheless is aware of and utilizes it in her writing. She employs affect by recreating the experiences and problems of embodied consciousness in different particular events of her life through recording the four primary instances of shame from a third person and out-of-body narrative style, even though she herself is the primary character. The emotions of shame, guilt, dread and humiliation all leave lasting impressions on Woolf's consciousness, as evidenced through the four scenes discussed in this paper.⁸

¹ Because many of the figures mentioned have the same last name, each will be referred to by his or her first name.

² All references to the text will be cited parenthetically as (MOB). All references to secondary texts will be cited as footnotes.

³ Sianne Ngai, "Introduction," *Ugly Feelings*, 2007, 3.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929, 28.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929, 28.

⁶ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "Introduction," *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2011, 1.

⁷ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "Introduction," *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2011, 1.

⁸ It is worth clarifying that the final two scenes I'm discussing are two parts of the same memory. The third scene is the preparation for the fourth scene, which is the presentation. These two parts will be discussed separately to convey the importance of each piece of this memory.

The motifs of shame, guilt and dread play significant and distinct roles in these scenes, but require specific descriptions of their respective meanings to convey the similarities and differences in those emotions. Shame is the most prominent motif in the four scenes. Shame is an emotion relating to the body that causes feelings of weakness and inferiority. This emotion is defined by Laura Marcus as breeding these three feelings due to a gaze from “[a powerful] other, whether this [gazing] figure is external or interiorized”.⁹ In the looking glass scene, Woolf’s shame is internally rooted in her own awkwardness and refusal to accept herself, whereas in the other three memories, her shame comes from the judgmental and disapproving gazes of her father and half-brother George.

Dread and guilt are closely associated with shame and are two other major motifs in the memories Woolf recounts in *Moments of Being*. Dread is defined by Christy Desmet as “subsequent uncertainty engendered in the living” and is exemplified by Woolf through the dread she experiences when she would eat lunch “in the anticipation of torture” (MOB 144) every Wednesday when the weekly books would be presented to her father.¹⁰ Dread connects to shame in that the emotion can be a “dread of fear or shame or distress” and being apprehensive or even fearful of these feelings.¹¹ Guilt is defined as feeling penitence due to a moral failing or infraction. This definition indicates that guilt has a religious connotation, as it requires one to hold oneself accountable to a moral standard. Guilt relates to shame in that “shame can understand guilt”,¹² as both involve feeling inferior and negative about oneself as a result of a perceived wrongdoing. Guilt differs from shame because “guilt cannot understand itself”,¹³ as guilt “is more isolated than shame is from other elements of one’s self-image”.¹⁴ Guilt additionally is distinguishable from shame in that shame does not have the same accountability attached to it. Guilt can also “direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparation [for] what has happened to them” due to the religious responsibility linked with the emotion.¹⁵ Guilt and dread are often intermingled because the feeling of guilt is often automatically

⁹ Laura Marcus, “‘Some Ancestral Dread’: Woolf, Autobiography, and the Question of ‘Shame,’” *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, 2018, 270.

¹⁰ Christy Desmet, “‘The Dread of Something after Death’: Hamlet and the Emotional Afterlife of Shakespearean Revenants,” *Actes Des Congrès De La Société Française Shakespeare*, 2018, 2.

¹¹ Silvan S. Tomkins and Alexander E. Irving, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 1995, 54.

¹² Laura Marcus, “‘Some Ancestral Dread’: Woolf, Autobiography, and the Question of ‘Shame,’” *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, 2018, 271.

¹³ Laura Marcus, “‘Some Ancestral Dread’: Woolf, Autobiography, and the Question of ‘Shame,’” *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, 2018, 271.

¹⁴ Laura Marcus, “‘Some Ancestral Dread’: Woolf, Autobiography, and the Question of ‘Shame,’” *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, 2018, 271..

¹⁵ Laura Marcus, “‘Some Ancestral Dread’: Woolf, Autobiography, and the Question of ‘Shame,’” *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, 2018, 271.

followed by a feeling of dread for committing the guilty action. These emotions each significantly influence Woolf's perceptions in the childhood experiences she illustrates.

There are four formative childhood experiences in *Moments of Being* that highlight the characteristics and intermingling of the emotions described above. The first of Woolf's most memorable childhood shame experiences is the incident with the looking glass at Talland House. That experience is her first mention of shame in the work, as well as the only instance in which shame and judgement come from herself as opposed to another person of superior power. This self-imposed shame provides a window into her thoughts which reveals multiple layers to her personality and her analytical approach to her memories. Woolf recounts that she would stare at her reflection in the looking glass as a child on the "threshold of self-awareness",¹⁶ according to Emily Dalgarno, but only while she was alone, stating that "[she] was ashamed of it... [and that] a strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it" (MOB 68). She also "add[s] a dream", (MOB 69) in which a "horrible face - the face of an animal... [or] the other face in the glass" looms over her shoulder. Woolf leaves this image vague and open to interpretation, but when taking into account the iconic beauty of the women in her mother's side of the family, this animal could be interpreted as admonishing her for falling to the temptations of vanity. In this scene, shame and guilt are partners that coerce Woolf into a self-conscious mindset. This shame that Woolf experiences as a child weakens her confidence and assuredness in herself. Furthermore, her harsh religious teachings, due to her inherited ancestral instincts in the Clapham sect of Puritans under her father, increases her inner struggle between enjoying beauty and pleasure and behaving in a morally correct manner.

Woolf is uncertain of the reasons for her shame and therefore contemplates possible explanations for its roots. The first answer she offers is that looking in the glass betrays her tomboy nature. It is ironic that Woolf identifies as a tomboy when most of the women in her mother's family are known for their elegant beauty. As such, Woolf laments that she is unable to recognize the same beauty within herself. She holds her mother and sisters as a "standard of comparison... [wondering if she] was..ugly, passionate [and] cold" (MOB 65) as well as "idealiz[ing] the face and gaze of [her] mother",¹⁷ as Dalgarno interprets it. These factors only strengthen the degree of judgement and shame she casts on herself because as long as Woolf's mother is her standard of beauty, she will always feel inferior and reprimand herself for falling short.

¹⁶ Emily Dalgarno, "Ideology into Fiction: Virginia Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past,'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 1994, 182.

¹⁷ Emily Dalgarno, "Ideology into Fiction: Virginia Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past,'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 1994, 179.

This struggle between embracing her maternal family's emblematic beauty and feeling comfortable expressing her true self introduces a central theme of Woolf's memories of shame: the battle between masculinity and femininity. This conflict exemplifies Berger's idea that "the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female".¹⁸ The simple act of Woolf gazing upon herself in the looking glass instigates a sense of male-dominated judgement with which her feminine side is naturally inclined to comply. However, instead of Woolf's shame incentivizing her to conform to a female stereotype, it leads her to realize that she has "inherited some opposite instinct" (MOB 68). This rebellious intuition is vital to her processing and hindering shame's fearful impact, as it emboldens her to fight in the face of judgement and tyranny.

An additional possibility Woolf considers for her shame is that she was sexually abused at a young age by her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth. Because of her age and gender, Woolf was unable to defend herself, and this sense of powerlessness, according to Ngai, "becomes the privileged object of ... guilty.. self-reflection" as well as intensifying the impact on her subconscious of the shame resulting from the looking glass incident.¹⁹ Because she was traumatized before she could defend herself, Woolf's encounter with Gerald introduces her negative attitudes towards men and illustrates the clash between the masculine and feminine members of Woolf's family. Dalgarno argues that "The experience with Gerald is a specific instance of the association of genealogy with the most hurtful and repressive ideas of patriarchal gender relations and may account for her feelings of 'ancestral dread'".²⁰ This quote illustrates that Woolf's incident with Gerald reflects back on her past feelings of dread, which is intriguing since dread is an emotion that is focused on the future. This passage emphasizes that Woolf views men, even those in her family, as domineering and dangerous. That view leads her to counter her "ancestral dread" (MOB 68) by defying shame's impact through her refusal to be controlled by its forces, which contrasts with the complete control shame has over many of her female ancestors.

In deliberating over her sexual exploitation as a cause for her shame, Woolf introduces the idea that her shame may also stem from earlier childhood memories and explores the instance of "being thrown naked by father into the sea" (MOB 70) as another factor. In this memory, Woolf is more physically exposed than when she stares at herself in the looking glass, which would be expected to produce a greater degree of shame. However, while this earlier memory intensifies and reinforces her looking glass shame, she seems to repress

¹⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, 47.

¹⁹ The full quotation is "becomes the privileged object of the newly autonomous art's 'guilty' self-reflection": Sianne Ngai, "Introduction," *Ugly Feelings*, 2007, 2.

²⁰ Emily Dalgarno, "Ideology into Fiction: Virginia Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past,'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 1994, 185.

this memory entirely and is only haunted by the powerful shame of the experience with the looking glass. Woolf seeks to escape that shame and retreat from men with her sister Vanessa, as Lili Hsieh puts it, by “form[ing] an Outsiders’ Society because the fact is, [women] are *de facto* the outsiders”.²¹ This society is Woolf and Vanessa’s “private nucleus” (MOB 143). Here, Woolf is able to be free from the burden and control of shame in the male-dominated world, explore her own interests and thoughts without male interference and strengthen her ability to defy shame.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative effects the shame from the looking glass has on Woolf, she combats them by embracing affect, her intellect and disassociating herself from that negativity. By utilizing these elements, Woolf is able to detach from the negativities associated with her earthly encasing and see the situation from a non-biased perspective that doesn’t highlight her insecurities and perceived failures. Woolf emphasizes that she feels that she was born millenniums earlier and possesses “instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past” (MOB 69). This quote illustrates that the shame she experiences does not mean that she is in fact failing in any way, but rather that she is choosing to challenge the causes of her shame, which have afflicted even the earliest of her female ancestors. As such, Woolf, in Hsieh's view, “untiringly reconstructs the situations of women in history” by channeling the analysis of her negative emotions to inspire herself to resist shame going forward.²² Since Woolf is, as Kimberly Coates interprets it, “attuned to visceral forces and vibrations that exceeded the limitations of their own skin”,²³ she is able to detach from the “terror[s] of real life”,²⁴ as well as “transcend... [these] painful experience[s]... by splitting mind from body” to experience the raptures and blisses of life from outside of herself.²⁵ This state of “non-being” (MOB, 20) provides an escape from shame as well as the opportunity for growth and knowledge by witnessing her experiences from a safe and objective point of view.

Woolf’s analysis of the causes of her shame from the looking glass incident has several aftereffects. The first is that Woolf’s shame checks her “natural love of beauty... [and fills it with] some ancestral dread” (MOB 68). Shame weakens Woolf’s willingness to think about her looks, which illustrates

²¹ Lili Hsieh, “The Other Side of the Picture: The Politics of Affect in Virginia Woolf’s Three Guineas,” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 2006, 44.

²² Lili Hsieh, “The Other Side of the Picture: The Politics of Affect in Virginia Woolf’s Three Guineas,” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 2006, 23.

²³ Kimberly Engdahl Coates, *Performing Feminism, Transmitting Affect: Isadora Duncan, Virginia Woolf And The Politics Of Movement.*, 2013, 184.

²⁴ Laura Marcus, “‘Some Ancestral Dread:’ Woolf, Autobiography, and the Question of ‘Shame,’” *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, 2018, 265.

²⁵ Emily Dalgarno, “Ideology into Fiction: Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Sketch of the Past,’” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 1994, 185.

Berger's observation that "the surveyor of woman in herself is male". Dread quickly follows shame's impact by turning any love for her own beauty into regret and a torment to even consider. Woolf also "can't powder her nose [or be concerned with her looks] in public" (MOB 68), as this would violate shame's control. In addition, "anything to do with [fancy or pretty] dress" (MOB 68) frightens her and makes her shy and uncomfortable. However, Woolf is jealous of others who don't suffocate under this burden of shame. One example of this is Julian Morrell who "r[a]n... all over the garden in a new dress" (MOB 68) and made Woolf wonder "Oh to be able to run like [her]" (MOB 68). The diction of the words "to be able to" suggests that Woolf is physically incapable of running or moving in an un-self-conscious way in a new dress, which emphasizes the profound role of shame in crippling not only her thoughts but her actions.

In the next recorded memory of shame, Virginia's weekly witnessing of her father's horrid mistreatment of Vanessa, Virginia's shame is felt secondhand, as it is directed towards another and instigated by a male figure in a position of power rather than by Virginia herself. In this case, there are two different embodied gazes, which changes the dynamic between and, as a result, degrades the relationships of the three members of this scene. The gaze of shame also has its source in another person, in that Virginia is forced to observe her sister's reception of this shame inflicted on her by their father, although their alliance in the nucleus means that Virginia must share in the shame as well. Vanessa is also gazing upon Virginia's shame, even though that shame is not given to Virginia directly. This scene takes place when Virginia and her sister, Vanessa, are forced out of their private nucleus each Wednesday to present their father with the weekly account of expenditures in the household books. The rebukes and reproaches he hurls at Vanessa if they don't meet his standards are intended to humiliate and shame Vanessa and Virginia.

This scene introduces the fourth key emotion in *Moments of Being*, humiliation, which is similar to the three previous emotions but not identical. Humiliation involves publicly making a person feel foolish by attacking that person's dignity and causing intense feelings of self-consciousness. Humiliation intensifies shame's effect in that shame lasts longer when one is humiliated in a specific moment in time. Humiliation differs from shame in that it is directed at a specific act and its effects can over time be forgotten, whereas shame is more ambivalent and overdetermined and therefore often leaves a lasting impact. Leslie's behavior toward the sisters contains the foregoing elements of humiliation in that he publicly chastises them in a manner that is meant to cause them deep anguish. His attempted humiliation of them is direct, immediate and has a clear source in the sisters, which intensifies its effects. In describing these humiliation sessions and her intense emotional reactions to them, Virginia paints a vivid picture of her father as a ruthless, dictatorial patriarch bullying his helpless

subjects and reveals the deep animosity she feels for him as a result of that behavior.

Virginia introduces the scene by stating that she and Vanessa ate lunch “in the anticipation of torture.. [of] the recurring terror of Wednesday ” (MOB 144). The diction of the words “anticipation”, “torture” and “terror” indicate the immense presence of dread in the scene. Here, dread, shame and humiliation combine forces not only to admonish the sisters for their wrongdoing and their seeming failures as people, but to do so in a manner so forceful and painful that they relive the same violation every Wednesday, even when they are not in their father's presence. Their father's capacity to inflict such shame and dread on the sisters is attributable in part to his being raised in the family “streak of the puritan, of the Clapham sect”.²⁶ This branch of the Puritans teaches that failures must be dealt with through reprimands and shaming in order to instigate change, which leads Leslie to leverage humiliation as a weapon and shame as a tool for moral reform. The dread for Virginia is amplified by the fact that the shaming is directed toward her sister as opposed to her. The fact that her father displays care toward Virginia and does not ever directly shame her on Wednesdays, but directs his fury instead at Vanessa, makes Virginia angry, frustrated and filled with “unbounded contempt” (MOB 144) for him and other similarly cruel men.

It is ironic that one of Virginia's perceived reasons for Leslie burdening Vanessa and her with insults and shame is that he has failed as a philosopher. Ngai states that there is “a special relationship between ugly feelings and [situational] irony” which is demonstrated by Leslie using the shaming of others as a tool to cope with his own shame over his professional failings and turn others who do not feel shame against each other.²⁷ Silvan Tomkins and Alexander Irving offer that “those who have suffered chronic shame must nurture a deep wish to humiliate the other”.²⁸ The diction of the words “nurture” and “deep” indicate that Leslie's failure and shame have been festering for years and suggest that these feelings have overpowered, paralyzed and numbed his other emotions. This sense of personal failure explains why Virginia's father appears devoid of empathy but bursting with ego, as well as the reason for his rage and misery being directed toward his daughters. When the weekly financial totals fail to meet his standards, Leslie roars “I am ruined” (MOB 146). This animalistic behavior of Leslie toward his young daughters emphasizes how internally degraded he feels and reveals that he is unconscious of his own behavior, as he “disguised his own feelings that he, as Virginia puts it, had no idea of what he was; and no idea of what other people were” (MOB 146).

²⁶ Laura Marcus, “‘Some Ancestral Dread:’ Woolf, Autobiography, and the Question of ‘Shame,’” *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, 2018, 268.

²⁷ Sianne Ngai, “Introduction,” *Ugly Feelings*, 2007, 10.

²⁸ Silvan S. Tomkins and Alexander E. Irving, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 1995, 73.

This lack of self-awareness emphasizes the destructive role of shame and conveys that shame and rage combined can blind and instill primal and defensive instincts. Leslie's use of shame as a tool to weaken the relationship between Virginia and Vanessa ironically strengthens it. Instead of this shame undermining the sisters' close relationship, it degrades Virginia's relationship with her father, as she states that the shame he unleashes upon her sister demonstrates that his "brutality could have been no greater" (MOB 145). Leslie's behavior in the Wednesday meetings gives him a feeling of power over the sisters but at the cost of irreparably damaging his image and relationships with them.

This scene also makes painfully clear the injustice of the masculine and more powerful family members toward their supposed dutiful and submissive feminine counterparts. Leslie's shaming of his daughters conveys that he indeed feels entitled to indulge his rage toward women and has no hesitation in doing so since his daughters are to serve as stand-ins and help calm his rage, as his wife did. His behavior illustrates the Victorian construct that women must cater to any male needs, both physical and emotional. This standard calls for women to serve as an audience for men, applauding their successes, sympathizing and consoling them when they fall short, and meekly accepting shame and insults when the men feel the need to blame the women for the men's failings. Kitty Maxse often had to "improvise with the utmost gallantry some compliment or opinion which pacified [Woolf's] father" (MOB 165), which only heightens his "extraordinary dramatization of self pity, horror and anger" (MOB 144) as well as his "exacting, greedy, unabashed" (MOB 145) need for praise. For these reasons, Woolf's feelings of contempt for her father continually grow, and she refuses to play the part of the Victorian woman: part angel and part slave. This defiance angers her father, as well as other male members of her family, but is key to Woolf's capacity to survive and rise above her encounters with George Duckworth and other members of her male family.

The third of Virginia's shame scenes in *Moments of Being* is the nightly presentations of Virginia and Vanessa in their evening clothes to their male family members. Each evening, the two sisters must wash and dress themselves in their best clothes and have their appearances judged by the male members of the family. Those presentations increase Virginia's resentment toward Victorian men and her defiance of shame's suffocation of her and Vanessa's freedoms. The shame of this memory is foisted on the sisters by the authoritative males, who use their power to require these presentations as a daily occurrence simply to suit their fancies (similar to the Wednesday book ritual mandated by Leslie, as discussed in the previous scene). Virginia, however, imposes a greater amount of shame on herself due to the presence of a Chippendale mirror, which echoes the shame from her earlier experience in Talland House. Virginia recounts the evening presentation ritual in the form of a story, similar to the looking glass memory,

which allows greater insight into her thoughts and reactions to this recurring humiliation. Each night, Virginia and Vanessa must forego any personal plans to “st[an]d shivering in front of washing basins...however cold or foggy” (MOB 150) and “scrub” (MOB 150) themselves to appear presentable for their male family members. The diction of the phrase “however cold or foggy” suggests that the men are indifferent to the health and well-being of the women in their family and only use them as objects to fulfill their Victorian need to exert their power over the women. The word “shivering” connotes negativity and suffering, which further intensifies the impression of purely selfish motivations on the part of the males, as well as conveying their dictatorial attitudes towards women. The fact that the sisters shiver every night before ritually preparing themselves to be judged also indicates that they shiver with dread about the ordeal, as well as at the prospect of being shamed. In this memory, humiliation, shame and dread join to subject the sisters to their male family members’ demands, remind the sisters of their subordinate status and emphasize that they should feel guilty if they fail to please these men.

The recurring shame Virginia and Vanessa receive from the nightly rituals paints the Victorian society in a repulsive light in Virginia’s eyes. This scene takes place in 1900, at the end of the Victorian era, so the fact that Woolf’s family still continues its oppressive practices deepens her hatred for the “fossil” (MOB 151) that is the Victorian Age. Woolf’s abhorrence of Victorian social structures and, as Maggie Humm puts it, “desire for severance from the Victorian past” is primarily due to its rules subjugating women.²⁹ Ladies are expected to fulfill the role of the devoted caretaker, always “behave with decorum”,³⁰ and insure that the “sanctity of the home and the joys of domestic life” are central in the family.³¹ Although this great amount of responsibility indicates a degree of respect for women, women are expected to “kn[o]w their place” as second to the men, act as “ornament[s] to...[their] dinner table[s]” (MOB 170) and “admire and applaud” (MOB 153) the men and all their accomplishments while remaining restrained and unselfish.³² This final statement of Woolf’s parallels Leslie’s attitudes toward women in the second shame scene, as he similarly expects Vanessa to remain restrained and sympathize with him for being the patriarch who has to pay the bills for their family.

The subordinate status of women is exemplified through the Victorian social norms often placing “ladies... [in the] accompani[ment] [of] male chaperones”,³³ which indicates that, even though the women ensure the harmony

²⁹ Maggie Humm, *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, 2010, 19, 20.

³⁰ R.G. Grant, “Queen Victoria,” *History of Britain and Ireland*, Dorling Kindersley, 2014, 278.

³¹ R.G. Grant, “Queen Victoria,” *History of Britain and Ireland*, Dorling Kindersley, 2014, 271.

³² R.G. Grant, “Queen Victoria,” *History of Britain and Ireland*, Dorling Kindersley, 2014, 278.

³³ R.G. Grant, “Queen Victoria,” *History of Britain and Ireland*, Dorling Kindersley, 2014, 278.

of the home, they are not trusted and must have a man keep watch over them. Due to “the weight of male authority, and of social convention” women must maintain a Victorian “surface manner” (MOB 150) to hide their true selves,³⁴ learn how to “play...the game [of Victorian decorum] well” (MOB 153) and educate themselves in the art of behavior. Virginia and Vanessa are forced to adapt these skills and, in doing so, relinquish many of their individual freedoms to their Victorian male family members.

Virginia and Vanessa “scrubb[ing]” (MOB 150) themselves to please their male family members symbolizes the Victorian males’ obsession with female cleanliness and purity and introduces the additional aspect of shame’s control of the sisters’ personal freedoms in this scene. The diction of the word “scrub” signifies a harsh removal of a visible layer and reflects the fact that the shame as a result of the bathing rituals continually removes the personal choices and autonomy of the sisters. Instead of Virginia focusing on her intellectual accomplishments, she and Vanessa must dutifully train to fulfill their expected roles in the Victorian family: roles that are, in her words, “not natural” (MOB 150). By relinquishing her personal pursuits for this new form of education, Virginia is unwillingly overtaken by shame, as she remarks that she became “conscious of fear; of shame” (MOB 151).

Virginia’s and Vanessa’s gratification of their male family members is “imposed on [them]... by the other side” (MOB 150), which illustrates the “patriarchally oppressive environment” of their family.³⁵ This environment increases the impact of the sisters’ nightly shame, as they are shamed both on a nightly basis in this scene and on a weekly basis due to Leslie’s continuous wrath in the previous scene. The constant shame from which the sisters suffer at the hands of the ruthless men in their family signify that the men cement “the rules of the game of Victorian society so thoroughly that [the sisters] have never forgotten them” (MOB 150). The men’s heartless insistence that the sisters must succumb to Victorian traditions conveys that the “fangs” (MOB 157) of Victorian society leave “a girl... [with] no chance” (MOB 157). Additionally, the power of Victorian society transforms Virginia’s family members into monotonous “machine[s]” (MOB 152). The “pressure of the[se] machine[s] became [so] emphatic” (MOB 150) to the point where she often could not feel or understand her thoughts and emotions. For this reason, Virginia becomes determined to detect and explore her emotions in order to, as Coates puts it, “disrupt..[the] rigid aesthetic traditions” of Victorian society.³⁶ Virginia also uses the analysis of her

³⁴ Maggie Humm, *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, 2010, 20.

³⁵ Maggie Humm, *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, 2010, 24.

³⁶ Kimberly Engdahl Coates, *Performing Feminism, Transmitting Affect: Isadora Duncan, Virginia Woolf, And The Politics Of Movement.*, 2013, 186.

emotions to “institute.. another regime of perception” that doesn't rely on the oppression of women.³⁷

Woolf's shame resulting from the nightly rituals is deepened because she prepares herself in front of George Duckworth's Chippendale mirror. This mirror connects to the mirror in the first scene and surely must remind her of her looking glass shame. The fact that this looking glass is crafted in the same style as that of Talland House instills feelings of shame and fear within Woolf, even before she presents herself to be directly shamed by her male family members. The looking glass also creates a feeling of dread in Woolf, as she must “try... to make [her]self not only tidy, but presentable” (MOB 150). Woolf's attempts to fashion herself to please her male family members solidifies her hatred for “everything to do with dress” (MOB 68) that stems from her childhood. As a child, Woolf encounters the world of dress with the looking glass at Talland House, but does not learn to perfect herself in the matter of appearance until she becomes a young woman who is expected to have mastered Victorian mannerisms. However, as a young lady, Woolf notes that often “dress and hair overcame” (MOB 150) her to the point where she would be terrified of the topic.

Woolf always feels awkward trapped in her own body, as it is the "surface" (MOB 150) that her family views and judges. She therefore deals with the resulting fear by detaching her consciousness from her body, similar to how she reacts to shame in the looking glass scene. The mirrors in both memories prompt Woolf to think about herself objectively and view herself from a separate perspective to “feel... ecstasies and raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or...guilt, so long as they were disconnected with [her] own body.” (MOB 68). Woolf's “transcendence and...resistance”,³⁸ in Elisabeth Pedersen's words, to her physical encasing is the only way for her to put her insecurities aside and comprehend how others view her. This understanding is vital to Woolf's “strategy of resistance to patriarchy” and the suffocation of shame caused by the nightly ritual,³⁹ which requires her to combat shame's forces and the sexist demands of her male family members. The shame that comes flooding back to Woolf as she prepares herself in front of the Chippendale mirror reinforces her childhood shame from the looking glass at Talland House, deepens her fear and hatred of anything concerning her looks, and increases the degree of

³⁷ Naomi Toth, “Disturbing Epiphany: Rereading Virginia Woolf's ‘Moments of Being’/Perturber l'Épiphanie: Une Relecture Des « Moments d'Être » De Virginia Woolf,” *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 2014, 7.

³⁸ Elisabeth Skou Pedersen, “‘One Thing Melts into Another’: Unanimism, Affect, and Imagery in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*,” *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, 2015, 184.

³⁹ Margot Kotler, “After Anger: Negative Affect and Feminist Politics in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*,” *Woolf Studies Annual*, 2018, 35.

dread she feels from the bathing ritual. Woolf's choice to view herself in part from a separate and objective viewpoint helps her resist the suffocation of shame caused by the nightly ritual. This resistance equips Woolf with the "growing understanding of her own... capacities" and the ability to withstand shame's control imposed on her by her male family members.⁴⁰

The final shame scene depicted in Woolf's *Moments of Being* is George's critique of Woolf for her handmade dress failing to meet his aesthetic standards. This memory is the only instance in which Woolf is the sole subject of another's gaze and judgement and is therefore forced to bear the full brunt of shame's impact. Gerald is also present in this scene and serves a similar role to Woolf when she witnesses her sister's shame from her father in the second scene. George's condemnation, combined with the secondary gaze of Gerald, results in her internalizing this shame to a greater degree than any of the other shaming situations, as she has never been aware of "so many...[emotions] out of all proportion to its surface cause" (MOB 150). It also intensifies her resentment of Victorian culture and her male family members for their devotion to the Victorian code. In this memory, shame, humiliation and dread all merge to weaken Woolf's confidence in herself and force her to submit to the dominant "masculinist tradition [of] [Victorian] [society] she criticizes so strongly".⁴¹ However, the effects of these emotions are only temporary, and Woolf regains the strength to resist the dictatorial behavior of her family and their culture. This shame scene is recorded in a manner similar to the previous two scenes: Woolf narrates the event but interweaves every reactive thought and emotion she experiences as it unfolds. The event takes place one night when Woolf chooses to present herself in a dress that she is proud of and worked hard to create, but knows that it may not suffice because she lacks the material resources to afford a dress of the expense and quality George will accept. George, instead of validating and appreciating her efforts, demands that she "Go and tear it up" (MOB 151). The shame Woolf receives from George as a result of his criticism of her dress leads Woolf to initially question herself as a person before resolutely fighting back against Victorian culture and its "smug and repressive" standards to which her male family members adhere so devoutly.⁴²

In the bathing ritual scene, Woolf dutifully attempts to display the conventional Victorian mannerisms she has been taught, even if she is often shamed for failing to meet the high standards of her family in doing so. Yet, in this instance, Woolf is especially shamed because her effort of making her own

⁴⁰ Marea Mitchell, "'The details of life and the pulsings of affect': Virginia Woolf's Middle English Texts," *The Chaucer Review*, 2016, 118.

⁴¹ Marea Mitchell, "'The details of life and the pulsings of affect': Virginia Woolf's Middle English Texts," *The Chaucer Review*, 2016, 107.

⁴² Maggie Humm, *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, 2010, 32.

dress in an attempt to please her male family falls short, and the resulting shame leads her to conclude that she is better off following the conventional, rigid steps necessary to be a proper Victorian woman. Victorian women are not only expected to be doting housewives, but also “always dressed in excess” to please those they serve.⁴³ Woolf's duty is to uphold these rigid conventions by presenting herself in her best finery each night for the enjoyment of her male family members. George's judgement through his “aesthetic disapproval...[and] moral...disapproval” (MOB 151) of Woolf's dress reveals that Woolf's dress contains metaphorical significance. Woolf states that the material she uses to fashion her dress is meant for furniture. George's shaming her for the shoddy craftsmanship of the dress, including its cheap material, indicates that Woolf herself is not made of the correct Victorian material and is only slightly more pleasant to look at than one of the less attractive furnishings of the house. George, being the “perfect [specimen] of the Victorian Age” (MOB 151), is made of the proper material in his eyes as well as those of Victorian society, and the shame Woolf receives from the realization heightens her insecurities regarding her public appearance.

The specific and personal judgment of Woolf issued by George reinforces the recurring nightly experiences of shame that Woolf must suffer and her hatred for “everything to do with dress” (MOB 68). The pressures of complying with her feminine duties in Victorian society further intensify her feelings of contempt for and resistance to properly performing her Victorian role. For a time, the strict Victorian standards combined with George's abuse of his power over her as a male pose a threat that Woolf will submit to the Victorian lifestyle, yet Woolf is able to overcome this pressure by defying her oppressive family patriarchy which, as Pedersen observes, “challenges but does not abolish the limits of [her] individuality”.⁴⁴

George's treatment of Woolf threatens to destroy her individuality, but she builds up resistance to his and her family's shame and judgement over the course of her nightly presentations, which gives her the courage to display herself in a dress she has created. Woolf notes that she is proud and “excited” but unable to shake feeling “apprehensive” (MOB 151), as the bathing rituals have ingrained in her a feeling of permanent dread. When George “fixed on [her] that extraordinarily observant scrutiny with which he always inspected [their] clothes” (MOB 151), Woolf feels “condemned from more points of view than [she] could then analyze” (MOB 151). The word “condemned” indicates a severe punishment,

⁴³ Lili Hsieh, “The Other Side of the Picture: The Politics of Affect in Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas,” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 2006, 40.

⁴⁴ Elisabeth Skou Pedersen, “‘One Thing Melts into Another’: Unanimism, Affect, and Imagery in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*,” *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, 2015, 184.

so the fact that Woolf feels condemned in more ways than one suggests that her punishment is that all of her personal freedoms will be invalidated. This passage conveys that George's extreme judgment not only shames Woolf and discredits her efforts, but forces her to feel guilty about her "insurrection...[and] defiance of his accepted [Victorian] standards" (MOB 151) while forbidding her from going against him and the formula of Victorian culture. This demonstrates Desmet's observation that "women of English history...generally receive harsher judgment than their male counterparts and are also more tightly controlled".⁴⁵

George's extreme reaction to Woolf's dress plays a major role in cementing Woolf's shame relating to "everything to do with dress" (MOB 68), her beauty and her image. Woolf's new dress is transformed into a negative symbol that demonstrates the dominating and daunting personas of her male family members. Woolf now "knuckle[s] under" (MOB 152) to the authority of the dress and never wears it again for any of her nightly presentations. Woolf internalizing this shame from the dress confirms George's disloyalty to her, eradicates her singularity and gives her an "outsider's feeling" (MOB 152), the feeling of being cast out of her own family.

The battle between masculinity and femininity in *Moments of Being* is especially prominent in this scene, as the older, wealthier and more powerful males use these assets to oppress the females and turn them into compliant servants. Woolf states that George receives "[a] thousand pounds [a] year whereas [she] had fifty" (MOB 152) which automatically puts her at a disadvantage. Woolf's creation of her dress is the best that she is able to produce with the income she has, yet the men in her family expect more from her despite her limited resources and opportunities. The mixed signals that Woolf's male family gives to the sisters parallel Leslie's attitudes in the second scene, as Woolf's father tells her and her sister to spend money on household items, yet shames them every week for those expenses being too great. However, it is "difficult to not comply" (MOB 152) for Woolf so she continually attempts to please them despite scrimping in her spending, as that is what her father shames her into doing. Yet, Woolf's efforts to overcome her financial disadvantage through her hard work in fashioning her own dress has the opposite effect of enraging George and inspiring a greater hostile reaction than her normal failures to measure up.

The extremity of George's reaction to Woolf's presentation of herself in her handmade dress causes his response to turn animalistic, which further communicates the subservient and inhumane roles of the females in the family. This savage rage correlates with the anger of Leslie in the second memory of Woolf's, which only deepens her shame from George and her dress. Woolf comments that George is "cuddling the dachshund" (MOB 151) while she is being

⁴⁵ Christy Desmet, "'The Dread of Something after Death': Hamlet and the Emotional Afterlife of Shakespearean Revenants," *Actes Des Congrès De La Société Française Shakespeare*, 2018, 2.

scrutinized by the “rasping, peevis...voice of an enraged male” (MOB 151) like she “w[as] a horse brought into the show ring” (MOB 151). These quotes emphasize the degraded role of women, as the dog is seen as a greater value to George’s life than Woolf. Woolf also employs diction by stating that George “scented some kind of [rebellion]” (MOB 151). The word “scent” paints the picture of a dog sniffing for something out of place. In this case, George is the alpha male who is content with his obedient follower, the dachshund, but has sniffed out Woolf’s challenge to his authority and so kicks her out of the pack. This comparison of the treatment of women and animals and the concept of alpha male mentality help shame Woolf into feeling as though she has committed some horrible offense and is now worthless for doing so.

These themes also illustrate the fragility of the males’ positions of power in their patriarchal society and the threat posed by Woolf in her rebellion against their Victorian traditions as one of her many “emotional responses to injustice”.⁴⁶ Woolf’s simple statement enrages George, as he feels threatened by Woolf, and this “defiance...was unfamiliar to him” (MOB 151). Therefore, similar to Leslie in the second scene, George masks his “petty emotions and personal fears” and his “serious displeasure at this infringement of a code” (MOB 151) by embracing a dictatorial attitude and casting intense shame, humiliation and guilt upon Woolf in hopes of protecting his power and authority.⁴⁷ Woolf’s refusal to succumb to and be programmed by the unjust standards for women in Victorian society infuriates George and the other male members of her family. However, her resistance highlights the fact that Woolf will no longer allow men to use shame to control her thoughts and actions, as she exemplifies Desmet’s charge to women by choosing to continually “challeng[e] the simplified, misogynistic accounts of [her] own deeds and misdeeds”.⁴⁸

The four central memories of shame in Woolf’s *Moments of Being* “piec[e] together...fragments” of Woolf’s childhood and young adult life by illustrating the methods in which shame, dread, guilt and humiliation shape her character and interweave themselves into her writing.⁴⁹ Woolf’s writing process is a form of catharsis to rid herself of the shame from her past that her male family members and society tried so hard to instill in her. While this work remains

⁴⁶ Margot Kotler, “After Anger: Negative Affect and Feminist Politics in Virginia Woolf’s Three Guineas,” *Woolf Studies Annual*, 2018, 48.

⁴⁷ Margot Kotler, “After Anger: Negative Affect and Feminist Politics in Virginia Woolf’s Three Guineas,” *Woolf Studies Annual*, 2018, 43.

⁴⁸ Christy Desmet, “‘The Dread of Something after Death’: Hamlet and the Emotional Afterlife of Shakespearean Revenants,” *Actes Des Congrès De La Société Française Shakespeare*, 2018, 8.

⁴⁹ Naomi Toth, “Disturbing Epiphany: Rereading Virginia Woolf’s ‘Moments of Being’/Perturber l’Épiphanie: Une Relecture Des « Moments d’Être » De Virginia Woolf,” *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 2014, 7.

unfinished, *Moments of Being* serves as an opportunity for Woolf to work through and analyze her emotions as a form of therapy to better understand and overcome her initial vulnerabilities toward shame. In the first memory with the looking glass, Woolf's self-imposed shame, dread and guilt provide her with the knowledge of the roots of her current feelings by analyzing her past traumas. The next memory, in which Virginia absorbs Vanessa's weekly shame and humiliation from their father as a second-hand observer, allows her to build on this foundation and begin to rebel against her patriarchal family. The third memory, involving the recurring shame and dread from Virginia's and Vanessa's nightly presentations to their male family members, threatens Woolf's foundation, yet her introspection reinforces that foundation and builds up resistance to the abuses of her other family members. The fourth memory, in which George directly imposes the four emotions on Woolf through his judgment of her dress, is especially harrowing for her, yet she is able to pick herself up again after her temporary moment of defeat and resist the unjust system of the male oppression in her family. Each of these experiences is a crucial step in Woolf's character development that helps her to continue to strike back against the oppressive effects of her past shame from her family and Victorian society.

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