

LAUGHING AT OURSELVES: THE JOKE IN THE STRUCTURE OF VIRGINIA
WOOLF'S NEW BIOGRAPHIES

by

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DEDICATION

To Otis Brower

My complement, my foundation, my partner.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf put a great deal of time and thought into the problems of biography. In addition to writing three books with the subtitle “A Biography” (*Orlando*, 1928; *Flush*, 1933; and *Roger Fry*, 1940), Woolf spent much of her time reading and reviewing biographical literature, and even contributed to the theory of biography with her review “The New Biography,” despite the fact that, “throughout her novels and essays, Woolf suggests, describes, mocks and theorizes about the inadequacy and the ‘futility’ of the writing of lives” (Kovalesky 2). Although much has been said of Woolf’s love of and struggle with biography, readings of her two experimental biographies have always treated the works as novels, a simplification that has ignored some of Woolf’s accomplishments in these two books. Because of her concerns with traditional biography, Woolf sought a new form for the genre that could encompass her interest in the often unrecorded lives of women and her search for the natural voice of a woman writer, as well as her ongoing artistic struggle with the expression of the interior of individual existence; the rhetorical structure she chose has led many critics to misread her two experimental biographies as novels.

There is little disagreement among critics that *Roger Fry* is not the same type of biography that *Flush* and *Orlando* are. Through most of the book, Woolf shies away from the tools of fiction and attempts to stay true to life, and “without the freedom provided by invention and humor, Woolf patterned her biography on the tradition before her” (Cooley 80). Much of the focus of critical conversation about *Roger Fry* has dwelt on why this book is written so traditionally, unlike Woolf’s other biographies. Truthfully, the situation in which she wrote *Roger Fry* was very different than the context in which she

wrote *Flush* and *Orlando*. Because of the potential controversies it contained, Woolf did not have access to Roger Fry's entire personality as she did to Vita Sackville-West's and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's, because "what Woolf feared was giving offense to five sisters who had been raised in the most constricted of Victorian households and isolated by their forbidding Quaker parents from the rest of the world" (Lewis, "Biographies" 315). The life of Roger Fry also may not have required the layer of fiction and complexity that marked *Orlando* and *Flush*. If Woolf had written the life of Vita Sackville-West in a factual and straightforward fashion, the author, and possibly the subject as well, could have ended up in prison. Another condition that separates Woolf's two new biographies from *Roger Fry* is the sex of her subjects. While this may seem like an obvious distinction, it is one that is often overlooked. Because the literary establishment of Woolf's time did not consider women's life stories to have merit on their own, such biographies needed something more in order to become the sort of literature that was taken seriously by critics. Biographies of men, however, had always been part of the literary canon. A biography of a man, as long as it was well written and took for its subject a man worth remembering, did not need anything else to earn respect. In the case of *Roger Fry*, the complexity present in *Flush* and *Orlando* was unnecessary to make the book rise to literary standards of the period. This is why, despite Woolf's great emotional attachment to her subject, *Roger Fry* remains an example of traditional biography and not part of her experiments with the genre.

While Virginia Woolf presumably learned the value of biography from her father, editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Leslie Stephen, it is not likely that he foresaw how that value would tie into his daughter's interest in the rising issues of

women's rights and, specifically, women in literature. Because Woolf saw the value of biography, she saw the problems that arose when very nearly all biography was by, about, and for men. Woolf sought in vain for a biographical tradition for women, one which would recognize the value of women's lives and sanction her own ambitions, and "when she found monuments missing, partially obscured, or imperfectly preserved by other chroniclers... Woolf called upon the power of her rich imagination to create a past she could understand" (Lewis, "Sense of the Past" 186). Woolf began looking for ways to fill the holes in the biographical tradition that had ignored women's lives for so long because, as she lamented in *A Room of One's Own*, when she went to the British Museum in search of information on the everyday lives of middle-class Elizabethan women, she was "looking about the shelves for books that were not there" (45). Although women were often characters in fiction and poetry, from ancient Greek tragedies to Shakespearean comedies, in biography they were rarely anything but shadows in the backgrounds of men's lives. When she spoke to young women attending college, in the lecture on which *A Room of One's Own* is based, Woolf challenged them to uncover the real lives of the women who had gone before them. She sought a more complete biographical tradition, but found that the existing tradition of biography, with its focus on exploits and actions, was ill-suited to present the lives of women, which rarely revolved around either. In order to accurately chronicle the lives of women, a different form of biography would be needed.

Woolf's call to action in *A Room of One's Own* wasn't just about creating a new way to write biographies of women; it was about finding a new way for women to write biographies, both at the sentence level and at the genre level. Woolf cited authors like

Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte to argue that a woman who wrote would structure her thoughts differently from the way men would because “the weight, the pace, the stride of a man’s mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully” (75). The pacing and structure of a woman’s words were likely to be different from a man’s because the two were trained to think in such starkly contrasting ways and about completely alternative worlds. However, what was far more important to the efforts of women who would write biography was Woolf’s observation that the works of women in the early nineteenth century were “with very few exceptions, all novels” (*Room* 65). Woolf saw two primary reasons for this phenomenon. The first was that the novel is, essentially, a study of characters, and “all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion” (66), due to her primary role as a caretaker, raising children, supporting her husband, and (especially in the middle and upper classes) managing the family’s social affairs. The second was an act of necessity; the woman who wrote took to the novel because “all the older forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she became a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands” (76). The traditional genres, from biography to play to epic poem, had all been established for centuries—with correct and incorrect ways to write them, which left little room for the emergence of women to write as women and not as imitators of men. If a woman were to write a biography as a woman, and not in mimicry of a man, then the genre of biography would have to change, to broaden until it could encompass something new.

The need for a biographical tradition that could handle both the less action-oriented lives of women and the fundamentally different mental stride of female

authors—in addition to being close to Woolf’s heart in and of itself—was also closely linked to her broader artistic experiments with the expression of the mind in writing. Many of Woolf’s novels grappled with the inability of words to truthfully describe the interiority of experience. From the described but unknown protagonist of *Jacob’s Room* to the interwoven narrators of *The Waves* to the parallelism of madness and sanity in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf never stopped trying to create a literary form that could capture a complete picture of the inexpressible human psyche. When she transferred this struggle into the tradition of biography, she brought her artistic endeavors with her, believing “the imagination essential to understanding history and acquiring knowledge” (Lewis, “Sense of the Past” 196). But she still sought a way to combine the truths that could be conveyed by facts—the acts of history—and the truths that could only be conveyed by fiction—the interior experiences of the biographical subject.

What Woolf was seeking was the resolution of a paradox. She worked toward creating this resolution, with varying degrees of success, in her two experimental biographies, *Orlando* and *Flush*. The form she chose was a rhetorical structure that would only later be identified in anthropological and psychological studies as a joke structure. According to William F. Fry’s *Sweet Madness*, the joke is a rhetorical structure designed specifically to meld paradoxically connected reality and fantasy in a way that makes sense to the human mind. This structure was ideal for melding the two layers of biography, the subject’s outer actions and inner experiences, in the manner Woolf called for in her article “The New Biography,” her 1927 review of Harold Nicholson’s *Some People*. By introducing this rhetorical structure to the writing of lives, specifically in *Orlando* (published in 1928) and *Flush* (published in 1933), Woolf created a new genre

of biography that could be wielded by a woman biographer in the struggle to write a life that truly conveyed both the subject's history and his or her personality.

II. STRUCTURE OF THE JOKE

“Don’t take it so seriously. It’s just a joke.” This dismissive tone is common when talking about humor in everyday conversations. What the joker generally means is “These words should not hurt; they have no power. I didn’t mean for them to have an effect.” Despite this, jokes can have quite an effect on audiences. While comedians might try to defend themselves against criticism by claiming that those offended or angry simply lack a sense of humor, the truth is that all words have power. In the case of jokes, their relationship with power and control is long and complex. Althou

gh jokes are often dismissed as silly or trivial, humor has been used for centuries as a way for the powerless to undermine the powerful; this tactic is so effective because the joke is actually a complex rhetorical structure that deals with paradox resolution.

Modern popular culture has generally treated comedy dismissively in everyday terms, but critics, psychologists, and sociologists have long realized its importance in communication. Humor is a non-threatening way to take control of a situation. This unique power structure is what makes comedy such a popular venue for social critique. Former comedian and critic Joanne R. Gilbert contends that “because it can avoid inflaming audiences by framing incisive—even incendiary—sociocultural critique as mere ‘entertainment,’ comedy is undeniably a unique and powerful form of communication” (xii). By inciting a desired reaction, the joker is controlling the attention of those around him or her, but because that reaction is laughter, this power grab does not threaten anyone else’s power. This is why a black comedian making fun of white people can make white people laugh; although the comedian’s words might be threatening to

their power in any other context, couched in a joke the words are safe: they demand no acknowledgment or change in behavior or values from the audience.

Although social critics have recognized the power of the joke, defining this particular phenomenon has been substantially trickier. There are three broad ideas about what makes something funny. The first assumes that humor is about the relief of tension—the laughter when the frightened teenager discovers that the noise outside her window is just a raccoon, and not a serial killer, for instance. These “‘Relief from restraint’ theories” focus on humor as a reaction to relief from fear or tension (Clark 21); by providing a socially acceptable outlet for subjects like bodily functions and inappropriate language, humor eases the tension of conforming to social norms. The second acknowledges humor as a power structure and sees it as a way of asserting superiority. According to this idea, “finding something humorous necessarily involves a feeling of triumph and superiority, and this is why we laugh at human incompetence, clumsiness, clowning and misfortune” (Clark 20). The third sees humor as coming from surprise—the punch line is unexpected, and “understanding a humorous text means having detected and resolved an incongruity” (Canestrari and Bianchi 539). This is why an over-used joke loses its power to illicit laughter; the audience knows how it ends. Although all three theories have merit and supporters, none seems to account for all humor, and the probable truth is that laughter serves more than one psychological purpose. The other limitation on these definitions is that the question of what humor is “has traditionally been regarded as a philosophical question” (Clark 20). Well-known approaches like Sigmund Freud’s writings on humor as a release of the unconscious, an interplay between id and superego, see humor in terms of psychological purpose. But all

these theories lack the structural aspect to defining humor. What actually makes something a joke? Is it a joke as long as the author or speaker intends it as such? Is it still a joke if the audience doesn't think it's funny? Anthropologist William F. Fry treats the joke as a rhetorical structure, one with predictable patterns and processes. According to his book *Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor*, the joke is, essentially, a series of interlocking paradoxes which are resolved through a dynamic interplay between different levels of abstraction—reality and unreality. Although a joke can take many forms, as the basic unit of humor it has followed the same simple structure from medieval minstrels to Shakespeare's biting puns to modernist dry wit to last night's sitcom. This structure is present in jokes large and small—sarcastic one-line responses and full-length comedic novels. It can be broken into three interdependent parts. These three interconnected parts are the play frame, the paradox, and the reversal.

The play frame is the component that will be instantly recognizable to any literary critic; it is essentially the acknowledgment of separation. Fry points out that when a joke is told, "clues are given that this, which is about to unfold, is not real. There is a play frame" (138). The play frame is a disconnection between the joke and the communication around it. The joke is only funny if the audience realizes that it is a joke; otherwise it is just a rude or nonsensical interjection. The play frame can be established in many different ways. A child will often reference a previously established joke structure: "Knock, knock." As a group of friends chats, one might ask, "Have you heard the one about the lawyer in the bar?" Other cues are more subtle. During a verbal conversation, a change in tone or body language can establish that what follows will be separate from everything else that has been said. In comedic writing, a character's teasing statement

might be attributed in the form, “‘that’s what I said,’ he joked,” so that diction establishes the play frame. Any cue that separates one piece of communication from the communication that surrounds it establishes a play frame.

The role of the play frame is to set the joke apart from the rest of communication. This “apartness” is what makes the joke a joke and not just another part of the conversation. The joke is likely to be connected to the surrounding communication in some way; the topic of conversation might remind someone of a joke they heard before, or one person might provide a humorous response to the question or comment of another. However, even though the joke might be connected in some way to the surrounding communication, it is still understood to be separate. During the joke, the participants will figuratively step out of the preceding comment and then, once the joke is over, step back into the conversation where it left off. If one person asks a serious question and another provides a humorous response, everyone involved understands that the question has not been answered. Take the classic exchange in which someone asks “what time is it?” and another person responds “It’s time for you to get a watch.” The joker has responded to the question but hasn’t answered it, which is why the joke is often followed by the joker adding “no, really, it’s 10 o’clock.” The exchange still requires another response to be completed, because the joke was separate from the real exchange.

The word “real” is an important one in communication studies. The joke is not taken seriously because it doesn’t count, it’s “just a joke.” It is important to remember that when Fry explains the establishment of the play frame, he uses the phrase, “not real” (138). This aspect of the play frame is easiest to understand in the form of sarcastic, or even mean-spirited, jokes. A crack about a friend’s height or weight is only funny if it is

acknowledged as a joke; it isn't real because if it were real it would be mean. The play frame serves the function of making the joke "not real" and therefore not serious—words don't mean the same thing they would without the play frame and they are not responded to the same way they would be.

The result of this interplay between real and unreal in the play frame is the creation of the second structure of humor: the paradox. The play frame sets up this paradox. The cues that make up the play frame—changes in tone, adoption of a persona or caricature, explicit statements, etc.—belong to both the joke and the larger situation in which the joke is being presented. Fry explains that "it is this self-referent quality of all the cues—verbal or non-verbal—which makes it inescapable that paradox be generated when these cues communicate about the processes of which they must be a part" (146). These cues, part of the reality surrounding the joke, create a separate existence for it, outside of that reality, but they are also part of the joke, part of the unreality they create. The cues that create the play frame are a form of meta-communication that describes this particular piece of communication as a joke. But if we consider that the play frame is also part of the humor, that, for instance, the adopted dialect is important to the joke, then the communication is, simultaneously, both the meta-communication and the communication that is being defined. One of the classical paradoxes is triggered when the play frame communicates that "this piece of communication is not real," but it refers to itself, making itself unreal. The play frame becomes one of the classical paradoxes: the liar paradox, sometimes called the Epimenides paradox after one of the oldest examples (Beall and Glanzberg, np). In this classic puzzle, a Crete named Epimenides claims that all Cretans always lie. The paradox arises because the statement falls under its own

claims. If all Cretans always lie, then Epimenides is lying when he makes the claim. The play frame of a joke is a form of liar paradox. It makes the claim that the joke is not “real,” but in doing so it renders itself unreal. This paradox is what situates the joke outside of other communication. In everyday usage, this paradox is dealt with using different levels of abstraction—meta-communication. There is a choice to treat such information as separate from regular communication. But humor relies on the paradox to remain in limbo, a completely different kind of communication, and allows for these different levels of abstraction to be resolved, rather than simply leaving them as separate entities.

While the play frame creates the paradox which is the foundation of the joke, the joke is not complete until the paradox is resolved by the reversal, or punch line. Fry asserts that “in all that is regarded as humorous in the adult human world, there is a buildup of the process to a climax or punch line” (147). Unlike the play frame and the paradox, the punch line is a humorous structure that everyone is familiar with—the thing that makes or breaks a joke. Everyone knows what a punch line is, because all humor hinges on it. For the stand-up comedian, the television writer, and the class clown alike, a successful punch line is the difference between thunderous laughter and awkward looks from a bemused audience.

Modern humor theory makes much of the importance of surprise to humor, but that incongruity is not enough. A random and disconnected statement tacked onto the end of a story does not turn the story into a joke. Fry points out that “punch lines seem to divert the stream of thought; they seem to call for a switch of ideas and expectations” ([emphasis in original]148-9), but that they only *seem* to do so. What makes a punch line

funny is that it resolves the joke in a way that is unexpected, but that still makes *sense*. The joke has to make sense in the end, because understanding is what brings enjoyment. Generally speaking, “a typical joke contains a set-up that causes perceivers to make a prediction about the likely outcome. The punch line violates these expectations, and perceivers will look for a cognitive rule that will make the punch line follow from the setup” (Strick et al. 214). The fun of the joke is finding the connection between setup and punch line. If the joke works, the audience learns something new; they have gained something from the joke. On a practical level, that is the function of the punch line: to resolve the setup in a way that is unexpected.

While simple unexpected resolution may be the practical, conscious function of the punch line, this structure, like the play frame, also serves a deeper, unconscious purpose. It cannot just resolve the joke setup; it must also resolve the paradox(es) that created the joke in the first place. It does this by pulling from what was implicit in the setup. Every piece of communication, whether verbal or written, contains implicit information, some of which is conscious and some of which is unconscious. In speaking, this implicit information can be contained in tone of voice, body language, and the shared assumptions of the communicators. In literature, implicit information can be conveyed by word connotation, generic conventions, point of view, and a myriad of other choices. This implicit information is doubly unreal, first because it is unspoken, and second because its implicit presence is placed within the play frame. Consider the following joke: Q: “What did one snowman say to the other?” A: “Do you smell carrots?” There are many implicit ideas in the first sentence; conscious implicit ideas might include the traditional idea of what a snowman looks like, the fantasy of the talking snowman (any of

several versions from song and film), the hypothetical builder(s) of the talking snowmen, etc. Unconscious implicit ideas might include assumptions about snow by a person from a warm climate who has never encountered that type of precipitation in real life or the experiences of a person who grew up with snowy winters—unconscious ideas tend to be individualized. The punch line pulls from the implicit ideas; the joke would fall flat if the first line were “What did one snowman, built in the traditional style with coal for eyes and a carrot nose, say to the other, identically built snowman?” The punch line has to pull from the unspoken, or un-written, implicit content of the joke. According to Fry, “It is the art of the punch line of the joke to snatch some of this implicit material from the world of the Shades and project it into the workaday world or, in other words, into reality” (162). Fry uses the metaphor of the Shades, the ghostly and insubstantial, to point out that the punch line draws on information that that was implied but left unsaid in the joke, and uses it to balance the real and the unreal. Here, again, the issue of reality becomes paramount. The punch line brings that which was implicit in the world of the play frame (the unreal) out into the world (the real). In doing so, the punch line resolves the real/unreal paradox of the joke by redefining both sides of the equation. This redefining of reality and unreality is the key function of the punch line because the paradox cannot be resolved if the two sides remain separate, although they are inherently not the same. On the other hand, the resolution cannot cause the paradox to disappear. The punch line doesn’t introduce new information that renders the paradox irrelevant. Instead, it introduces a fulcrum, a point of rotation that allows the two sides of the paradox to become dynamic, moving back and forth between the real and the unreal. Where the underlying paradox—a statement that makes itself untrue—is generally sidestepped with

a label like “meta-communication,” in the joke the different levels of abstraction become fluid, exchanging places while remaining separate.

This type of resolution is created by the interplay of the three structures: the play frame, the paradox, and the punch line. All three structures must be present in order to create a joke, and can be found in any joke. Consider the following joke: “There are two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and says, ‘You man the guns; I’ll drive.’” This joke, silly as it is, contains all the joke structures.

First, there is a play frame. I set it off from the rest of the paragraph in two major ways: first, I prefaced it with an introductory phrase, “consider the following joke,” which alerted my readers that what followed would be separate from the rest of the paragraph; then, I put the entire joke in quotation marks to show where the separate piece of communication began and ended. Those two choices were meta-communications about my writing that I embedded within the writing, setting up the joke and triggering the paradox.

The paradox set up by the play frame continues within the joke itself. The first sentence, “There are two fish in a tank,” is part of the play frame fantasy, but is simultaneously a perfectly reasonable statement. In and of itself, it does not stand out as silly or unrealistic. It continues the paradox by defying the expectations set up by the play frame. The paradox continues and builds with the punch line: “One turns to the other and says ‘You man the guns; I’ll drive.’” A paradox has been created between the two sentences. It is perfectly realistic for two fish to be in a fish tank, but completely unrealistic for a fish tank to be weaponized and mobile, in addition to being manned by talking fish. However, it is perfectly realistic that a military tank should have guns and

wheels and that the two soldiers inside it should split up the duties, but completely unrealistic that those two soldiers should be fish. The joke is neither entirely real nor unreal, because conceding the reality of the setup immediately triggers the unreality of the punch line—if the fish are in a fish tank, why are there weapons?—while accepting the fantastical nature of the setup makes the reality of the punch line come undone—if the fish are in a military tank, how are they supposed to work the controls and why doesn't all the water leak out?

Although the punch line is part of the paradox, it is also the resolution of the paradox—another paradoxical situation. The issue of real/unreal is paradoxical because the two parts of the joke—setup and punch line—cannot both exist in the same place; if the setup is real, it makes the punch line unreal, and if the setup is fantasy, it leaves the punch line back in the real world. But it is the two simultaneous existences of both parts of the joke that allow the situation to be resolved. The punch line, by being simultaneously real and unreal, and by pulling from the implicit content of the setup, allows for the resolution of the paradox by giving the setup the same, simultaneous, real/unreal status. If the punch line were only real, if the joke went “There are two fish in a tank. They swim in circles,” it would cease to be a joke and become merely a statement. Likewise, if the fantasy were to shift into the setup, if the joke started with the statement “there are two fish in a military tank,” the humor would disappear along with the paradox. It is the paradox, triggered by the play frame and resolved by the punch line, which creates the joke.

Fry's theory, while it does take a structural, rather than a philosophical or psychological, approach, is still based around the idea of amusement and laughter. But

can this rhetorical structure be applied in other ways? According to this structural theory, humor is a unique and complex method for paradox resolution. It is unique because it does not rely on finding a way to make the paradox disappear (as happens when a new idea is introduced to make the seeming paradox part of another concept), or on finding a way to ignore the paradox (as happens when issues are simply relegated to different levels of abstraction). Instead, humor resolves paradoxes by creating dynamic movement between the real and the unreal. Maybe that is why it represents such a perfect solution to another paradox: Virginia Woolf's paradox of biography. As a structure that existed outside of, as well as within, traditional literature, the structure of the joke turned out to be exactly what Woolf needed to fuse granite and rainbow in her "New Biography."

III. PARADOX IN THE NEW BIOGRAPHY

Woolf's most explicit statements about her concerns with the tradition of biography come from the article "The New Biography," a review of Harold Nicolson's *Some People*, published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on October 30, 1927. She starts "The New Biography" by quoting Sir Sidney Lee's statement that "the aim of biography is...the truthful transmission of personality" (Lee 25-6). Woolf does not argue with Lee's assessment of the goal of a biography, but rather seems inclined to take him at his word. However, this definition is problematic, for, as Woolf points out, "no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us" (149). That problem is the combination of truth and personality. Truth is that which is absolute, quantifiable, provable, "truth in its hardest, most obdurate form" (149). Personality, on the other hand, cannot be counted or proven; it is changeable, personal, incorporeal. Knowing this, the biographer's goal becomes the task of using the "granite-like solidity" of truth to communicate the "rainbow-like intangibility" of personality, a paradoxical aim for any single work to accomplish. But, as has been established, the joke presents an existing rhetorical structure for dealing with exactly such a paradox. She may never define it in precisely those terms (although she certainly values humor as part of biography), but the new biography form Woolf seeks is really a new incarnation of the joke structure. As Woolf moves through the history of biography and the flaws of each age, the problems she sees are all caused by the lack of this joke structure.

Woolf starts with biography of the mid-1600s, citing Izaak Walton and Mrs. Hutchinson, to whom, "a life, even when it was lived by a divine, was a series of exploits" ("New Biography" 150). The problem with such biography is its lack of

depth—it acknowledges no possibility of anything but the granite of fact. Biography had become a summing up of the life of the awe-inspiring dead, serving to simultaneously memorialize and justify memorialization. The biography is an admittedly artistic justification for its own existence—the actions attributed to this person that make the individual worth remembering. The focus on actions also makes this type of biography ill-suited to the lives of women, which, even among extraordinary women, generally include fewer exploits—battles and confrontations—than important relationships and acts of creation, processes that rarely have definitive beginnings and endings. But for both sexes, the human conflicts and flaws of the individual are hardly relevant in a biographical tradition that values only chronological facts. Such biographies do not allow for deeper meaning; they do not admit to the existence of the rainbow. The paradox of granite and rainbow, fact and personality, cannot be resolved if it is not acknowledged.

Although early biography may have ignored the paradox of fact and personality, there is a shift in the genre based on the work of one man. With James Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson, published in 1791, there arose "one of those curious men of genius who seem able to break up the stiffness into which the company has fallen by speaking in his natural voice" (Woolf, "New Biography" 150). Boswell's gift was in making his subject human and relatable, more than just engaging in a series of actions. Thanks to his ability to bring out his subject's personality, "we may sit, even with the great and good, over the table and talk" (150). While traditional biography tended to treat the subject as larger than life, Boswell's subject was human and fallible as a result of Boswell's elevation of the inner personality. This introduction of the inner life introduced a new layer of complexity that required a newly complex rhetorical structure.

Once Boswell opened the floodgates, biography throughout the Victorian era openly acknowledged the importance of personality, concerning “itself as much with the lives of the sedentary as with the lives of the active” (150-1). Although this was an important step, it led to problems as well. The biggest one was the inability to create an interplay between truth and personality—the paradoxical shifting that is resolved in the joke structure with the punch line. As a result of the lack of interplay, biographies began to “take shape in innumerable words” (151), becoming heavy, multi-volume monstrosities that attempted to contain every word that could possibly be said about a single person. The granite of truth and the rainbow of personality both existed within biography, but because they were so fundamentally different, they could not be combined, only added one on top of the other. This resulted in a biography that created “a sense of the prodigious waste” as a single life toiled through multiple volumes in which facts and tidbits of personality were thrown together in hopes that the reader could dig out the magical mixture of truth and personality from within the pile. It seems the complexity that Boswell introduced was lost on biographers who thought that it was enough to throw together the inner life and the outer life without finding a new structure that would serve both.

It was not until the twentieth century that biographers achieved a certain level of balance; Woolf points out that “in the first twenty years of the new century biographies must have lost half their weight” (151). Biographies slimmed down because biographers were becoming comfortable picking and choosing which facts should and which should not be included. This learning to choose did two important things. First, by acknowledging that some facts were more important than others, biographers were

beginning to put the intangible, the rainbow of personality, on an equal playing field with the tangible, the granite of truth. Truth did not become unimportant, but it did become subject to prioritization. Second, it gave the biographer the power to make the choice. Giving the biographer that power means acknowledging the artistry of biography, which allows the genre to do more than just tell lives; it joins the ranks of modern literature by carrying a deeper meaning.

This set of developments led Woolf, finally, to the author of the biography she had set out to review. Woolf observes of *Some People* that Harold Nicolson “is as much the subject of his own irony and observation as [his subjects] are” (153). By introducing himself into the narrative, Nicolson creates the play frame that triggers the joke structure; he lets his audience know that this biography is different, that it is not the work of some omniscient, objective narrator—the type who would be incapable of analyzing personality—but is the work of a man, recognizing the humanity of other men and women. Largely as a result of this, Woolf argues that Nicolson “has succeeded remarkably, if not entirely, in making the best of both worlds” (152). Nicolson has begun to engage the paradox, putting him far ahead of most other biographers, in Woolf’s opinion. Even so, her optimism is tempered, for he had not entirely succeeded.

Although Woolf does not define her requirements for new biography in the terms of a joke structure, she does see the importance of humor to the enterprise. Nicolson’s book is full of humorous scenes and stories, which is part of what makes him so present within the work. But not just any humor will do; Woolf specifies that “since his laughter is the laughter of intelligence it has the effect of making us take the people he laughs at seriously” (153). Woolf values the humor present in the book, but it is intelligent,

complex humor. She is beginning to point in a very specific direction for a solution to the problems that remain with Nicolson's biography, problems she will seek to solve as she begins to write biographies herself.

Even after reading *Some People*, Woolf still struggles with the paradoxical problem of biography: "let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously" (154). This inability to trust a mixture of fact and fiction was one that Woolf acknowledged elsewhere in her life; in a letter to Hugh Walpole she admitted that "its some deficiency of mine that I cant like fiction with a historical date to it [*sic*]" (Letters 5:177). She was uncomfortable with the mixing of fiction and non-fiction genres. In her constant push to find a way to convey human experience in words, she had hit upon the tools of fiction, like poetry and metaphor, as the ultimate method of conveying experiences, but struggled to find a way to connect these tools to concrete facts. Because she was so focused on the subjectivity of experience, she feared that the objectivity of facts would crush her attempts. Mixing fiction into facts, she felt, makes the reality less trustworthy, and limiting fiction to reality impedes the message of a work. Woolf fretted that the imagination struggles with the paradoxical mixing of truth and personality, but, as complex discussions about the structure of humor were only beginning in the new field of psychology (which took a while to begin taking humor seriously), she had not yet recognized the value of the joke as a rhetorical structure for dealing with exactly such a paradox.

The other issue that holds Nicolson back is that, while humor exists throughout his book, humor is not part of its foundation; his subjects "never occupy the stage for more than a few brief moments" (154). The humor exists in a series of funny anecdotes,

rather than in the structure of the work. There is an important distinction between the funny moments of a book and its underlying structure. The first just make the book pleasant to read; to truly resolve the paradox of truth and personality in a single person, that resolution must encompass the entire representation, or biography, of the individual. Jokes don't have to be present—the biography must become *a* joke, not a series of jokes. A series of jokes, such as those present in *Some People*, merely makes a biography entertaining. In order to resolve the paradox of truth and personality within one individual's life story, that entire story must be told as one single, coherent joke structure, with a play frame and interlocking paradoxes that are resolved in a final punch line. A joke the length of a book is not merely designed to elicit laughter. A joke so long and complex might not even be funny in the everyday sense, but it will provide a satisfying structure for a work built of Woolf's granite and rainbow. Nicolson "waves his hand airily in a possible direction" (155) of this solution, but without a single punch line, a climax or resolution that resolves all the paradoxes of an individual's life, his biographies become nothing more than enjoyable sketches about his subjects.

To understand why the joke structure is so important to what Woolf wants biography to do, it is important to think of the joke in more anthropological than common terms. We may refer to something as "just a joke" when we mean that is unimportant or meaningless, but Fry's analysis shows that the joke structure actually adds complexity—or, rather, provides a structure in which to build complexity. Jokes are so common that we think of them as easy or childish, but anyone who understands the art of satire knows that jokes can be anything but trivial or frivolous. A book-length joke structure allows literature to contain multiple levels of meaning which all remain cohesive.

The punch line of the joke structure also lends itself specifically to the sort of complex literature that Woolf was looking for in biography. Normally, talk of resolving a paradox means introducing a new idea or viewpoint so that two things that couldn't coexist before suddenly can. The punch line, however, introduces a different type of resolution. The punch line resolves the paradox by making the definitions of both sides dynamic, allowing the two sides to become each other without losing their opposition, a type of resolution Woolf was already using in "The New Biography":

Like radium, [truth] seems able to give off forever and ever grains of energy, atoms of light. It stimulates the mind, which is endowed with a curious susceptibility in this direction as no fiction, however artful or highly coloured, can stimulate it. Truth being thus efficacious and supreme, we can only explain the fact that Sir Sidney's life of Shakespeare is dull, and that his life of Edward the Seventh is unreadable, by supposing that though both are stuffed with truth, he failed to choose those truths which transmit personality. For in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity. And it is obvious that it is easier to obey these precepts by considering that the true life of your subject shows itself in action which is evident rather than that inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul (152).

Here Woolf sets truth and fiction in opposition, but resolves their incompatible nature by using metaphors of light and darkness to make each side of the equation fluid. By describing truth as giving off light, then talking about shaded facts, and referring to "the

light of personality” and the inner life that “meanders darkly,” Woolf makes both truth and fiction into dynamic ideas, both light and dark. They become each other without becoming a single entity. Where paradox resolution usually comes in the form of a larger idea that negates the paradox, in Woolf’s writing “the opposites take on each other’s characteristics, change their own natures, become each other in a sense, while retaining their opposition to each other” (Maxson 230). This sort of complex resolution is characteristic of the joke structure and provides a solution to the oversimplified biographical methods that Woolf felt were holding the genre back. And it is this final complexity that Woolf felt was still missing from *Some People*, although she did feel that the book was moving in the right direction.

Woolf was seeking a structural way to deal with what she considered to be the paradoxical nature of biography—the requirement to convey personality, which was best portrayed through fiction, with facts that could not be freely manipulated. Her years of writing which focused on the complexities of subjectivity meant that any biography that presented a simplified version of its subject would leave her wanting. The rhetorical structure of the joke, with its paradox resolution through dynamic definitions, was ideally suited to her needs. It would allow fact and fiction to combine without losing the strengths of either.

Although Woolf enjoyed *Some People* immensely, she saw it as only partially successful. Her love of written lives drove her to find a resolution to the great paradox of biography, but she seemed to despair of another author finding that resolution: “nor can we name the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow”

(155). What Woolf may not yet have been confident enough to realize was that she was well on her way to becoming exactly that biographer in her own works: *Orlando* and *Flush*. By applying her practice of resolving paradoxes through dynamic metaphors to the structure of her two experimental biographies, Woolf created books which were structured as jokes in order to create the fusion of fact and fiction that she had been seeking.

IV. *ORLANDO*: THE JOKE

It's not uncommon for a book to be taken less seriously than its author would like, but *Orlando* has the distinction of being taken more seriously than its author ever expected. Within a year of the publication of "The New Biography," Woolf had published her first example of this new genre. Published in 1928, *Orlando* started as a vacation from Woolf's more serious writing; in fact she discovered that she had "written this book quicker than any: & it is all a joke" (Woolf, *Diary* 3: 164). She actually wrote the book in a matter of about six months in an attempt to create something that was "half laughing, half serious: with great splashes of exaggeration" (Woolf, *Diary* 3: 168). When corresponding with friend and critic David Garnett, she would admit that "I wrote it in such a tearing hurry that anything, horror or sublimity, may be there for all I know" (Letters 4:32). It's not surprising that the book's full meaning has been such a subject of critical discussion, considering that even Woolf might have found surprises when rereading. The book has at least three accepted purposes: it functioned, first, as a veiled biography of Vita Sackville-West, second, as a commentary on the limitations of various types of biography, and, finally, as a study of how subjective experiences affect the creation of an individual's identity.

The story of *Orlando* functions as a biography, although its real subject is never named as its primary character. The story itself follows the life of Orlando, born the son of a noble family in Elizabethan England, who ages only 36 years from his birth in the mid-to-late fifteen hundreds to the biographer's present in 1928. In the course of this long life, Orlando meets Shakespeare, meets and comes to serve Queen Elizabeth the First (during this service he has several love affairs), and flees to his home to nurse a broken

heart by falling into a week-long sleep before awakening and returning to society and being named ambassador to Constantinople. In Constantinople, he survives a riot, endures another mysteriously prolonged slumber, is unexplainably transformed into a woman, and runs away with a band of “gipsies.” When her artistic bent begins to cause friction with the Gipsies, Orlando returns to England by ship, where she fights to inherit her ancestral home despite now being a woman (and possibly presumed dead). One of the women she knew as a young man returns to her life, now unveiled as having been a man disguised as a woman all along. Orlando struggles with her new identity—not androgynous, but not only male or female. Eventually Orlando finds a man whose sexual identity is as nebulous as hers, marries him, publishes the poem she has been writing since she was a young man, and has a child. While the story functions as what might be termed “a historical fantasy,” it also has a second function as a biography of Virginia Woolf’s sometime lover, Vita Sackville-West. Orlando’s ancestral home and lineage are both based on Sackville-West’s family holdings and history, and Orlando’s thirty-six years mirror her life. Although certain details are changed, Sackville-West’s love affairs (with both men and women) and travels track roughly with Orlando’s story, including her publications, marriage, and eventual maternity. These two levels of the story were both openly acknowledged by Woolf, who studied Vita Sackville-West’s family history and personal life—Sackville-West even read and approved of the book before publication.

Woolf created *Orlando* as an expression of several different ideas: a veil for the Sapphic love affair with Sackville-West that could have gotten her arrested if she spoke it plainly; as a pleasant diversion from duller, more serious work; but primarily as a new form of biography that could serve her artistic, as well as her factual, knowledge. It was

this final idea that has made *Orlando* such a rich and enduring book. Woolf was attempting to write a biography that took advantage of the spark she saw in Nicolson's *Some People* while overcoming that book's limitations. In addition to presenting an account of the life and family history of Vita Sackville-West, Woolf sets out in *Orlando* to resolve the paradox of welding granite to rainbow—creating a biography that is true to the facts of the subject's life and true to the subject's interior personality—by setting genre conventions in opposition to each other in order to make them dynamic enough to handle the complexities of individuality.

The Play Frame

The first piece of the joke structure is the play frame—the clues that let the audience know that this *particular* act of expression is different from others—which establishes the triggering paradox of the joke. *Orlando*'s sense of separation is created by the self-referential quality of its generic conventions. Woolf uses a self-conscious narrator, Orlando's self-styled biographer, to constantly inject concerns of form into the narrative. The narrator makes continuous references to the rules of biography, but in doing so he is often breaking those conventions. In most literature, generic conventions exist to be unspoken. They give the audience a guide for understanding a work so that the author does not have to give them instructions. Woolf, however, uses those guidelines to upset the reader's assumptions about how to read *Orlando*, setting it outside all the standard genres. Despite the narrator's assurances, it cannot be read simply as a biography, because almost every reference to the limitations of the genre comes with a violation of those rules. And, although many critics have assumed that *Orlando* "is called a biography but is in reality a novel" (Baldanza 274), the book cannot be read solely as a

novel, either: too much of the story is based on historical reality. By mixing documented historical facts with clear fantasy elements, and using a self-conscious narrator to constantly remind her audience exactly what she was doing, Woolf set up the play frame which would introduce the triggering paradox of her book-length joke, *Orlando*.

In modern parlance, *Orlando*'s genre designation might best be summed up as "historical fantasy." Woolf used *Knole and the Sackvilles*, a book about the family of Vita Sackville-West and the estate which had been at the center of their family for centuries, to shape the book in its movements through history. The novel is so realistic in many ways because "the character of Orlando is based on the history of the Sackville family as well as on Victoria Sackville-West herself" (Hoffman 435). Charles G. Hoffman asserts that Woolf chose the family partly for her emotional connection to Vita, and partly because the family, "in their various personages and in the history of Knole House mirrored the spirit of the age in which they lived" (436). The political and artistic accomplishments of various members of the Sackville family tended to be representative of the larger trends of their respective eras. Everything from the family's noble lineage, to Orlando's appointment as a Turkish ambassador, to descriptions of the opulently decorated rooms in the family estate, comes from the Sackville-West's family history.¹ Despite the more fantastical elements, like Orlando's longevity and mysterious sex-change, all the action exterior to Orlando himself/herself is based on historical fact, and all the personal and artistic developments are based on the life of Vita Sackville-West.

Despite the firmly grounded underpinnings of the story, *Orlando* contains a series of elements so fantastical that no audience could be expected to extend their suspension

¹ Frank Baldanza's "*Orlando and the Sackvilles*" details Virginia Woolf's use of *Knole and the Sackvilles* as a source for much of the historical information in the novel.

of disbelief far enough to encompass them. Orlando's much spoken-of longevity is actually a trait universal to the characters within the story, as it also seems to apply to most of the supporting characters, several of whom put in appearances in Orlando's life that are separated by centuries. Additionally, most of Orlando's major life changes are preceded by death-like sleeps that last for days. There is also, of course, the famous, unexplained sex-change that Orlando goes through a couple of centuries into his/her long life. Despite the trappings of history and the constant assurances of the narrator, the fantasy elements of the story keep it from serving directly as a work of biography or history.

The mixture of fact and fiction that runs throughout *Orlando* is constantly set into sharp relief by a narrator so self-conscious that he cannot stop bringing up the process he has gone through to create the biography he is presenting to his readers. *Orlando* is presented from the point of view of Orlando's biographer, who "is always present as its narrator, though he assumes the foreground in his own person only sporadically. Orlando's story is infused with the biographer's personality" (Maxson 100). It's not just the narrator's presence that is important, but the way in which the narrator never lets the audience forget the limitations of his chosen genre. The problems of biography that Woolf identified in "The New Biography" can be forgotten by an audience that is spared the complexities of a book's creation, but Woolf denies the audience the ability to forget the biographer's difficulties by creating a biographer so unsure of his creative process that he must justify every step of it, pointing out its existence to his audience in the process. And every justification he offers serves to remind the audience of the play frame, the structural impossibility of what the biographer is trying to do. Throughout *Orlando*,

the narrator speaks in a self-referential pattern that ensures the audience can never forget that this story is bending genre rules. As Fry states in *Sweet Madness*, in all jokes “it is this self-referent quality of all the cues...which makes it inescapable that paradox be generated when these cues communicate about the processes of which they must be a part” (146). These self-referential moments are part of the story, indivisible from it, but they are also something else, one level removed from the story, asides to the audience to remind them that they are, in fact, an audience. Woolf uses these self-referential moments to create the self-conscious narrator by regularly alluding to the structure of the book and by offering justifications for the limitations and imperatives facing the biographer. Within the book, the biographer is treated as the author, so all rhetorical decisions are ascribed to him, and form a cohesive characterization. Many of these asides, in addition to revealing the structure of the story, also frame the story in a way that simultaneously makes the construction part of the story; the structure is dependent on the fantasy it contains.

Orlando’s biographer uses his professional designation as a shield to protect himself from potential criticism. Throughout the story, the biographer brings the audience’s attention back to the traditional rules of biography and the limitations those rules place on him as the “author” of a biography. He states explicitly that “the first duty of a biographer...is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads” (49). The biographer lays out his job description then follows it immediately with a justification for why he cannot meet it, showing self-consciousness because he lacks the confidence to make rhetorical decisions without presenting justifications. In addition to defining what

he is, the biographer also goes out of his way to define what he is not. Early in the book he rejoices that the biographer of a man like Orlando needs not “invoke the help of novelist or poet” (12). Later in the story, he wraps up his description of Orlando’s love of literature, “leaving the novelist to smooth out the crumpled silk and all its implications” (55). He is more circumspect about putting his limitations in specific terms later in the story, when he concedes that, “the story of [Orlando’s] adventure with a Moor in Venice of whom he bought (but only at the sword’s point) his lacquered cabinet, might, in other hands, prove worth the telling” (80-1). The narrator continually defines himself as a biographer, in opposition to labels like “novelist” and “poet.” These references to his own position as biographer serve to characterize him as nervous or self-conscious, presenting excuses for his shortcomings, his inability to “smooth out the crumpled silk” or tell the story of the Moor in Venice. In addition to using these references to illustrate the biographer’s character, Woolf also applies them to her concerns about the genre of biography and its limitations. By forcing her fictional biographer to deal with these limitations, she is also forcing her audience to recognize them. She gives the reader enough to make him curious: What exactly happened during the sword fight with the Moor in Venice? The curiosity ensures that the reader will keenly feel what is missing when the biographer truly limits himself in the use of the novelist’s art.

The biographer regularly calls attention to his limitations by leaving the audience hanging, but he also draws his readers’ attention to the limitations that require him to leave in information he would otherwise prefer to cut. During Orlando’s withdrawal from the social world, after his humiliation at the hands of Nick Greene, the biographer describes the passage of time by saying that Orlando, “saw the beech trees turn golden

and the young ferns unfurl; he saw the moon sickle and then circular; he saw—but probably the reader can imagine the passage which should follow... a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that ‘Time passed’ (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened” (72). In addition to referencing a section from *To the Lighthouse*, this part essentially provides the audience with two possible ways the biographer could have treated the section. With a justification of his choice, though, he has actually avoided making a choice, because he includes both possible treatments. Even when the biographer does settle on the more readable option, he still often feels the need to justify it. During Orlando’s remodeling of the ancestral mansion, the biographer provides a partial list of purchases, but cuts it off with the explanation that “already—it is an effect lists have upon us—we are beginning to yawn. But if we stop, it is only that the catalogue is tedious, not that it is finished” (80). If the previous passage could have been stated simply “Time passed,” this one might have been sufficiently stated with the abbreviation “etc.” The biographer still cannot make an editorial choice to cut material without offering an explanation for his decision. The inability to fully choose one style for these passages contributes to the characterization of the author as self-conscious or insecure. He knows that “Time passed” is the choice that would work best for the story that he would like to tell, but he feels unable to make that choice because biography must sacrifice artistry to clarity. He wants his audience to know that he could have written a more readable passage if his genre had not limited his options.

This need to explain his rhetorical strategies sets the biographer apart from Woolf, his author. After describing the celebrations that follow the settlement of Orlando’s court

cases, the narrator tells the audience that this series of events “is properly enclosed in square brackets, as above, for the good reason that a parenthesis it was without any importance in Orlando’s life” (188). The biographer is concerned that the audience will miss the significance of the brackets, unlike Woolf, who has used a similar rhetorical strategy in the past without such coddling for her readers. In *To the Lighthouse*, primary character Mrs. Ramsay dies in a parenthetical note (132). In *To the Lighthouse*, however, Woolf does not feel the need to point out the meaning of this structure to her readers; she trusts that they will understand the implications². One of the most important themes of *To the Lighthouse* is the idea that all human monuments are ethereal, so it is fitting that the death of the family matriarch, so important to the other characters and the reader, does not merit a dedicated sentence. But Orlando’s biographer is not nearly as confident as the author herself, and so feels the need to add an explanation to ensure that his readers will understand. Although he is presented as the writer of the story, he does not claim the full power of an author to control the narrative; instead he lays out the reasons for his choices, suggesting a concern that his judgment is not trustworthy. Woolf uses her insecure narrator to illustrate her concerns with the nature of biography: the choices an author must make in order to avoid the tediously “amorphous mass” of Victorian biography (“The New Biography” 151). By forcing her biographer to confront the stresses such thoroughness places on good storytelling, Woolf also brings the issue to the reader’s attention. In doing so, she again brings the audience back to the play frame by forcing them to examine the story in the context of other biographies and novels and

² Other literary scholars have discussed this important topic in great detail. Although the self-referential nature of the allusion does add to its meaning, its structural function is meant for an audience that includes readers not familiar with Woolf’s other works.

acknowledge that *Orlando* is situated outside of both categories, much like the title character, who defies categorization at every turn.

Although much of the biographer's contribution to the play frame is a result of his self-consciousness, he also contributes to it by doing something that most biographers do: referring to source material. When Orlando leaves home to serve the queen, the biographer worries about the sudden lack of sources because "up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer" (49). In most of the other cases when the biographer brings up his source material, it surrounds the more fantastic elements of the text, like Orlando's two deep sleeps and his change of sex. During the celebration of Orlando's promotion in Constantinople, the biographer quotes directly from three different sources—"the diary of John Fenner Brigge" (93), a letter from Miss Penelope Hartopp, and an article "from the Gazette of the time" (96)—each introduced with enough specifics that an interested reader could, presumably, look them up himself. The fact that the sources are fictional is entirely beside the point; the appearance of objectivity is what is most important. The story is told in a series of largely direct quotes, complete with ellipses showing where the original material had been damaged or unreadable. The biographer uses these sources to bolster his own credibility, particularly when he is presenting the more fantastic elements of the story. Woolf uses their introduction to bring the story back to her concerns about the nature of biography, of the limits placed on it by documented facts that do not always tell the whole story. These sources also bolster the play frame because references to sources, which are of course fictionalized given the nature of *Orlando*, pull the audience through multiple layers of fantasy, reality, and

fantasy posing as reality. There is the fantastical story of Orlando, there is the reality of the book's structure (ellipses and gaps in the story that force the audience to consider their meaning), and there is the pseudo-reality of the source materials, which are arguably more fictional than most of the story—which is at least based on the personality of a real person and the history of her family—and float in a layer of fiction between the fantasy of the story and the reality of the book's structure.

Woolf's narrator continues to draw attention to his limitations with his open admissions to the lack of control he has when writing the biography. The life exists on its own time frame, in its own format, and the biographer claims he has no power to change the story's flow in order to control the narrative. When young Orlando's mind races from life to death, "the biographer must not stop either, but must fly as fast as he can and so keep pace" (34). And when Orlando the grown woman sits down to finally complete her poem, her biographer despairs of her doing anything worth writing about until "at this moment, but only just in time to save the book from extinction, Orlando pushed away her chair" (200). And when Orlando goes into labor with her son, her biographer pleads: "Is nothing, then, going to happen...to shroud this undeniable event whatever it may be?" (214). The biographer often struggles with the powerlessness he feels. Because his subject is, for him, a real person with a real history, the biographer is forced to follow the action of the story, rather than create it. He must follow where his subject's mind goes, rather than setting the focus of the story himself, and when his subject refuses to participate in the kind of activity that a biographer can write about, he must wait for her to finish, at the risk of never being able to complete his book if she never ceases to write. But the birth of Orlando's son is one point when the biographer truly loses control of the

story. He spends nearly two pages desperately seeking a reprieve from the unspeakable act he is witnessing—unspeakable because Orlando becomes a mother in the Victorian era, when sensibilities dictated that pregnancy and childbirth remain unspoken in polite company. But he cannot simply skip over the episode because biography requires the whole “truth,” so he must find somewhere else to focus the audience’s attention during the birth, as if he were standing in the doorway trying to distract a curious bystander. Because he is a biographer and not a novelist, he, unlike Woolf, is beholden to the action of the story; he cannot control it. Woolf uses the biographer’s lack of control to illustrate a larger concern with the genre of biography. The world of literature was still shifting in Woolf’s time away from consideration of traditional literature, which included histories, biographies, and philosophies, to focus more on the modern definition of literature, which focuses primarily on poetry and fiction. Fiction is an art in which the creator has complete control of plot, character, even reality. When a character is left unknowable, like Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, that mystery is one the author chooses not to explain away, often to make a point about the unknowability of real people. Biography, however, like other non-fiction writing, is beholden to outside truth; its writer has comparatively little freedom. While artistry might make biography more enjoyable to read, when it comes in conflict with truth and verifiable fact it must always be defeated. In “The New Biography,” Woolf seeks a way for biography to avail itself of the tools of fiction without losing credibility. Her biographer’s powerlessness illustrates for the audience the limitations the traditional biographer faces. Although the book lacks the truth of biography, the narrator faces the limitations of biography, forcing the audience to

move through both the genre of the biography and the genre of the novel in order to understand the text.

Woolf may be the author of *Orlando*, but the audience is never allowed for a moment to forget that she is not Orlando's biographer. The biographer is a character himself, as Miles argues: "this dual construction of character, one which includes both biographer and subject, allows Woolf not only to explore thematic elements, such as Orlando's negotiation of gender roles, but also to examine the ways in which various ages of life writers depict such themes" (213). The biographer is, arguably, as important a character as Orlando to the development of the narrative. But this is not an uncommon practice in writing, and on its own would not create a play frame around the book. In the case of *Orlando*, what really makes the biographer distinctive is his self-consciousness, which drives him to comment constantly on the construction of the book. This focus on construction creates the play frame. Like a joke, it is not to be interpreted in the same way as other communications. Just like the play frame of a verbal joke sets it apart from the rest of the surrounding conversation, the play frame of *Orlando* sets the book apart from the rest of the world of literature; it cannot be interpreted the same way a traditional biography would; the fantastical elements eliminate that possibility. Nor can it be interpreted the same way a novel would, for the biographer tells us at every turn that it is not a novel. It is something else, subject to different rules of understanding. This play frame, which exists on multiple levels (and moves the audience constantly between the different levels), triggers all the paradox of the joke structure and gives the book its complexity.

The Paradox

The play frame establishes the problems of genre convention within the story, triggering a paradoxical identity for a book whose biographical truths cannot be overpowered by its reliance on the tools of fiction. Woolf keeps this tension building throughout the book by keeping the two aspects in a rotational opposition. The sections which adhere to the strictest rules of biography are those sections which relate the most fantastical elements, like Orlando's sex change or his magically deep sleeps; likewise the most poetically written sections are those dealing with experiences that would be fare for traditional biography, like meetings with royalty and household inventories.

Despite the narrator's constant assurances that he is, in fact, a biographer, there are only a few places in which the writing style truly mimics that of classical biography. Importantly, these biographically styled sections are those which present the most fantastical elements of the story. For instance, Orlando's first great and unexplained sleep is not only one of the places in which the biographer begins to get defensive about his credibility, it also one of the first times in the book that the narrator lapses into classical biographical style—he claims explicitly that he has been using “private and historical” documents to validate the truth of the story. This assurance might come as a surprise to the audience, as this is the first mention the biographer has made about any reference materials. No such documents have even been mentioned, much less specified, before this point. This inexplicable event is also the first specific date given: “One June morning—it was Saturday the 18th” (49-50). The most specific time period given before this point was the year of the Great Frost. Orlando's birth, his first introduction to the

Queen, his engagement—none of these experiences was recorded with an exact date. These sorts of credibility-bolstering tactics are reserved for more fantastical events.

The second fantastical turning point in Orlando's life is introduced in a similar fashion. The last action before Orlando's second great sleep—the one which ends with Orlando waking as a woman—is the ball celebrating his being made a Duke, another place where Woolf has injected reminders of traditions of biography by citing sources. Descriptions of the party are pulled from “the diary of John Fenner Brigge” (93), a letter written by “Miss Penelope Hartopp, daughter of the General of that name” (94), an edition of “the Gazette of the time” (96), and “the testimony of the sentries and others” (97). These sources are quoted directly, complete with blank spots where words were unreadable from the sources, and the distinctive accent of a witness whose words have presumably been recorded verbatim. Despite the biographer's assurances before Orlando's first great sleep, his source material is only ever mentioned when the biographer feels that his credibility might be called into question by the fantastic nature of events. As a metaphor, these two deep and unnatural slumbers stand for a kind of death that allows Orlando to be completely submerged in his current crisis, only to be reborn with a new character aspect that will allow him (and later her) to adapt to the new circumstances. In more poetical works—those which focus more on honestly conveying human nature than on delivering facts—using metaphors of death and sleep to signify a sudden and significant shift in a person's understanding or outlook is quite common. By using fact-based signifiers of biography to relate the metaphor, Woolf begins to set in motion the dynamic relationship between truth and fiction that will ultimately be fulfilled in the punch line.

Woolf's use of biographical tools to convey fantasy is a start in setting up the paradox, but it would not be complete without the inverse—Woolf's use of poetic styles to convey biographical content. This side of the coin is a more constant thread through the book, and perhaps a less obvious one. There are opportunities throughout the book for the biographer to reference real sources, rather than the fictitious examples from Orlando's coronation ball. Woolf used real and well-known sources in writing the book, most famously *Knole and the Sackvilles*, and she could easily have referenced specific dates and facts which might have made the book noticeably more grounded in reality. For instance, rather than tracing Orlando's noble genealogy, as would happen in a traditional biography, Woolf sums up the family history prior to Orlando's birth with the romantic statement that "his fathers had been noble since they had been at all. They came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads" (12). There is no mention of names, dates, or even eras, no mention of great battles or acts that earned favor from some king. The family on which *Orlando* was based certainly had such history available, or at least family legends and beliefs, but Woolf chose the more artistic route to describe the family history.

Specific dates and ages are exceedingly rare in *Orlando*, and generally only associated with more fantastical elements, such as the great sleeps. The Queen visits Orlando's ancestral home in his youth, an occasion which any family would be sure to record with great reverence, but, despite again having at least one specific instance to draw upon in the Sackville family history, Woolf chooses to keep the details of the Queen's visit obscure. The Queen is never explicitly named; neither is the poet accompanying her, a writer understood to be Shakespeare by readers familiar with the

details of his description. In a traditional biography, such important encounters would be dated, given details, documents would be referenced, recollections from others in attendance. Here, only Orlando's jumbled thoughts and impressions are given. These could, presumably, come from some personal diary or journal, but none is ever mentioned by the biographer who was so insistently concerned about his credibility.

Even when Woolf is drawing directly from documented facts, her poetic language carefully conceals her source material. When describing Orlando's descent into poetry, Woolf describes his holdings artfully:

Orlando, to whom fortune had given every gift—plate, linen, houses, men-servants, carpets, beds in profusion—had only to open a book for the whole vast accumulation to turn to mist. The nine acres of stone which were his house vanished; one hundred and fifty indoor servants disappeared; his eighty riding horses became invisible; it would take too long to count the carpets, sofas, trappings, china, plate, cruets, chafing dishes and other movables often of beaten gold, which evaporated like so much sea mist under the miasma. (55)

For this passage, Woolf was again drawing from *Knole and the Sackvilles*, but rather than give a direct list of the family's possessions, which she could have done, she couches the description of the family holdings in a metaphor of evanescence. The riches are listed only to melt into non-existence as their owner becomes engrossed in the intangibles of literature and poetry. The use of metaphor here is partly a representation of Orlando's deeply romantic frame of mind, but also serves to render these biographical facts into a different style than traditional biography would dictate. Just as Woolf rendered the most fictional elements of the book in classical biographical style, she obscured the aspects of

the book that were most traditionally biographical—meetings with royalty, engagements, possessions, ages, names—with the more poetic language of fiction. The fact, or the conveyance of truth, and fiction—the conveyance of personality—remain in opposition, but these distinctions are beginning to trade places through the language used to convey each.

The opposition is further complicated by scenes that openly blur the lines between the two. The layers of truth and fiction don't just trade places within the story; they interact. When Orlando falls into his second great sleep, the one that ends with his startling transformation into a woman, the biographer creates what starts out as a metaphor; the Ladies of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty try to keep the biographer from telling the audience what has happened, but are chased away by the trumpeters of truth. But, mixing the metaphor and action of the story, “the trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast:—‘THE TRUTH!’ at which Orlando woke” (102). The biographer's metaphor has just woken his subject. Just as the play frame interacts with both the conventions of biography and the conventions of fiction, the Ladies and the trumpeters are both metaphor and reality within the story. This passage, which closely follows perhaps the most overtly biographical section of the text—the directly-quoted description of Orlando's coronation—serves to completely confound the generic conventions that have just been professed. This movement between the various levels of abstraction—literal truth from Woolf's real subject, Vita Sackville-West and her family; the realism of the story in Orlando's experiences; and the narrator's poetically metaphoric description—paves the way for the punch line, the final reversal which will

ultimately allow the granite of fact and the rainbow of fiction to achieve smooth, dynamic definitions.

Punch Line

The final structure required to create a joke is the punch line—the logical twist that will resolve the paradox(es) of the joke, creating dynamic definitions that allow both sides of the equation to switch places. According to Helen Maxson, “*Orlando* is a climactic novel. At its end, the events of the plot, by then largely fantasy, bring the main character to an apex of happiness and insight. The themes of the novel converge in a single passage in which each one reaches its fullest development” (230). Although Maxson does not label this section of the book a punch line, she sees its effect clearly. The oppositional paradoxes of the work are resolved because, “rather than losing their opposition to a third stance, rather than coming together in a larger whole, the opposites take on each other’s characteristics, change their own natures, become each other in a sense, while retaining their opposition to each other” (230). The section in the last chapter which *seems* to resolve the internal paradoxes is actually a simplification. The various conflicting pieces of Orlando’s identity “come together in a larger whole.” Essentially, every individual is actually made up of a great number of selves, some male, some female, some old, some young; thus all of Orlando’s seemingly contradictory traits are explained (225-6). If an individual is made up of many selves contained in a single consciousness, that consciousness can be male or female, old or young, even alive or dead, depending on which self is at the forefront during any given moment. This passage is often considered the climax of the book, with what follows treated more as a prologue than as resolution, because it neatly ties up the themes of Orlando’s life story. However,

while this passage may serve as a climax to Orlando's story, it does not solve the structural paradox of the novel—how can a written life contain both the factual history and inner personality of the subject when the fiction needed to convey personality will render all facts suspect and the hard facts of true history will crush the delicate balance which fiction requires?

While the introduction of multiple selves provides an explanation for the paradoxical nature of Orlando herself, the resolution of the play frame, the melding of granite and rainbow, is more subtle and more complex. The key to the final resolution is, predictably, the very end of the book: "As Shelmerdine, now grown a fine sea captain, hale, fresh-coloured, and alert, leapt to the ground, there sprang up over his head a single wild bird" (241). The bird is the key to understanding this final passage. The bird is not a proud, majestic hawk or eagle, or even a heron or egret. It is a goose, an intentionally absurd choice because, "the fact that Woolf's absurdity is so explicit undermines its power to undermine the miracle. The lyric and the absurd work, not against each other, but together in an ecstatic union of opposites against the temporal world" (Maxson 259). The absurd becomes miraculous—the poetic, realistic. The ending gives the reader permission to take the joke seriously.

If the story had ended on a majestic bird full of metaphorical attachments—an eagle, perhaps—the whole meaning of the book would be changed. It would simply be written in one of two styles. Either it would tell the complete life story of an individual, with an acceptable moment of higher literary musing at the end to make the reader feel that he had gained some nugget of Truth from the story, or it would be a work of fiction more focused on conveying some higher Truth without being weighed down by facts.

The goose is a departure from traditional biography, but is also a realistic ending. On the one hand, there is nothing at all surprising about a goose appearing on an English country estate. But the image certainly seems absurd. The goose is not a representation found in traditional biography. Great leaders are sometimes compared to eagles or hawks, but the goose paints a very different picture. It isn't a dignified bird; its clumsy movements are reminiscent of the traits that have made Orlando seem awkward and relatable, such as the clumsiness of the young boy who "strides out of the room, and catches [his] foot on a painted chest as [he] does so. For Orlando was a trifle clumsy" (14). The goose is a homely bird. While it might seem that Orlando, descendent of nobles who "came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads" (12), would be better represented by a stately falcon or other bird of prey, the goose seems more closely aligned to the grandmother who "had worn a smock and carried milkpails" (21). This often-overlooked climax scene brings together the different pieces of Orlando's identity in a more subtle way than the acknowledgment of her multiple selves. The rising bird, an opportunity for great traditional symbolism, is instead used to foreground all the less dignified aspects of Orlando's character. More than that, it ties Orlando to her real-life inspiration, Vita Sackville-West. Woolf certainly loved Vita dearly, but her feelings about Sackville-West's artistic endeavors were known to be less than complimentary. She wrote derisively to mutual friend Ottoline Morrell of Sackville-West's "sleepwalking servant girl novels" (*Letters* 5:26). The goose, with its loud, grating honk, is certainly a less-than-flattering comparison for Sackville-West's attempts at literature. In a subtle way, the scene with the goose ties together not only Orlando's multiple selves, but Orlando the fictional character and Vita Sackville-West the real woman. Reading this scene as the

book's climax allows the fiction, the character Orlando, and the reality, the woman Vita Sackville-West, to come together, providing the connection between reality and fantasy needed to create a true punch line.

The goose defies the genre conventions of biography—the truth-telling genre—and so is part of the book's fantasy leaning, but is still more realistic than what is expected from the biography. By simultaneously being the most realistic part of the scene and the most absurd, the goose provides the switching point of the punch line, letting the real and the unreal (fact and fiction) switch places so smoothly that they never come to a stop; the fact and fiction of the story become dynamic. Woolf takes advantage of the literary leanings the genre of biography allows itself to create a scene that twists the two genres around each other. The simultaneous reality and absurdity make the genre definitions dynamic. The absolute truth—the revelations of Orlando's life—can be heralded by a joke—a silly-looking goose where the audience would expect a bird of grace and majesty. The biography can be simultaneously fact and fantasy. The book's genre placement does not become one or the other—biography or fiction—but the two switch definitions in terms of realism, allowing them to coexist.

This section is set apart from the paradoxical genre mixes that preceded it. In those passages, a section was clearly either fantasy couched in the terms of biography, or biographical facts conveyed in poetic, fictional language. The punch line, however, does not belong to one side or the other. The goose is both fantasy in the sense that no such scene would be expected in a biography and reality in the sense of being the most practical possible ending. It is this delicate balance that sets the definitions of both reality and fantasy in motion. By allowing the two genres to switch places and represent each

other in this way, Woolf retains the factuality of biography but removes the rules that were constraining the genre. She gives up the control of the biographer and takes on the god-like control of the novelist, all without losing the reality of fact which makes a biography honest.

Conclusion

Orlando was Virginia Woolf's first real attempt to solve the problem of "The New Biography." She spoke of it lightly and thought it would "be a most amusing book" (Woolf *Diary* 3: 157). She seems to have gone out of her way not to put too much stock in it, even though her husband took the book "more seriously than I had expected. Thinks it in some ways better than *The Lighthouse*" (Woolf, *Diary* 3: 185). Modern literary scholars have taken Leonard Woolf's side, arguing that "in *Orlando* she succeeded by dressing her biographical portrait in the vestiges of fiction. She employed humor, satire, and invention and defied temporal and biological truths in order to express the 'reality' of Vita Sackville-West" (Cooley 72). Woolf achieved her goal: "the truthful transmission of personality." She did so using a rhetorical strategy perfectly suited to the paradoxes with which she struggled in the genre of biography. It is also, arguably, the best example of the style that exists, which is not surprising, given that she only ventured into this biographical experiment once more in her lifetime.

V. *FLUSH*: THE JOKE

Even more perplexing than *Orlando*, *Flush: A Biography*, published five years later in 1933, has always been problematic for Virginia Woolf scholars, who have never been able to come to a consensus on how to interpret the story or how seriously to take it. Despite the confusion, Craig Smith points out that “it was Woolf’s most popular book during her lifetime” (348). As a piece of popular fiction, it was considered an enjoyable read, and was even selected by the American Book Society, which Woolf herself seemed to find surprising (*Diary 4*: 175). *Flush* was certainly more accessible to the average reader than some of her more obviously experimental works, such as *The Waves* or *To the Lighthouse*. But while the book certainly sold well, and appealed to a broad audience, critical reception was more ambivalent, and “this reception, growing out of what was thought and said about Woolf and her subject rather than from an examination of the text itself, would prove characteristic of the book’s critical history” (Craig Smith 357). This would prove to be a problem as much among modern scholars as it was among Woolf’s peers. The book “has never achieved canonical status, whether in Woolf’s modernist canon or her feminist one. If few critics took *Flush* seriously at the time of its publication, still fewer consider it worth their time today” (Caughie 47). The habit of dismissing the book in critical circles was most likely a result of the book’s subject matter; a biography of a poet’s pet cocker spaniel certainly sounds like a children’s story. The book was seen as frivolous and fun, even cute. Because of the tone and subject of the story, *Flush* came across as more traditionally feminine than Woolf’s other works. Although *Flush* can certainly be read as straightforward and humorous, it also represents a unique and

complex experiment in the genre of biography, and deserves to be studied as the original and rich literary work Woolf intended it to be.

Woolf's personal writings show that the critical dismissal of *Flush* was a concern to her. The book was released as she was working on the book that would eventually be *The Years*, and she wrote in her diary that "Flush will be out on Thursday & I shall be very much depressed, I think, by the kind of praise. They'll say its 'charming' delicate, ladylike" (4: 181). Because "charming" and "ladylike" writing was not considered important literature by scholars and critics, that sort of praise could have been very damaging to a woman with a literary career. If Woolf became known for such writing, she risked allowing her other works to be taken less seriously. Some of Woolf's letters have generally been used to dismiss *Flush* as unimportant, as she would regularly refer to it as a joke. In one letter specifically, to her friend Ottoline Morrell, Woolf seems to dismiss the book: "I wanted to play a joke on Lytton—it was to parody him. But then it grew too long, and I don't think its up to much now" (*Letters* 5:162). Lytton Strachey was an old family friend of Virginia Woolf, and a famous biographer himself. This statement is often assumed to mean that the entire book was meant to parody Strachey's biography of Queen Victoria, and that Woolf largely lost interest after he passed away. Another letter, however, suggests a more specific reference for the idea. Woolf wrote to David Garret that, "the last paragraph as originally written was simply Queen Victoria dying all over again—Flush remembered his entire past in Lyttons [*sic*] best manner, but I cut it out, when he was not there to see the joke" (*Letters* 5:232). Strachey ended his biography of Queen Victoria by speculating that she ended her life dreaming about certain important parts of her past, and there is certainly a passage in the last chapter of

Flush that could be seen as a parallel. The more specific letter implies that, rather than *Flush* being one long parody of Lytton Strachey's work, in which Woolf lost interest after his death, the book was originally meant to include such a joke that was later shortened once the target was no longer alive to appreciate it.

Woolf may have written dismissively of *Flush* in some cases, but she was willing to defend her work in personal letters to individual correspondents. When friend and reviewer David Garrett attempted to point out inaccuracies in *Flush* and argue about the viewpoint, Woolf answered him in a sarcastic tone: "...not being altogether a dog, as you justly observe, [I] had no time to go to the London Library and prove that I'm not so inaccurate as you think" (*Letters* 5:231). She was willing to talk back when someone tried to dismiss the book because of its point of view. There was apparently a reason that she chose to write from a dog's perspective, and it was a choice she was willing to defend. Woolf may have responded snappishly to less than complimentary reviewers, but "writing less defensively to correspondents whom she did not suspect of being hostile, however, Woolf took a different tone" (Craig Smith 358). When Woolf found a correspondent who took *Flush* seriously, she was willing to admit that the book was more than *just* a joke. She responded to the praise of Lady Colefax by writing, "I'm so glad that you liked *Flush*. I think it shows great discrimination in you because it was all a matter of hints and shades, and practically no one has seen what I was after" (*Letters* 5:236). Unfortunately, no record remains of what deeper meanings readers were apparently missing. But Woolf was willing to admit, at least to appreciative readers, that *Flush* was more than just a joke.

On the surface, *Flush* is a sweet story that would make a perfectly delightful children's book. The story begins with the young cocker spaniel's life in the suburban home of Miss Mitford and her elderly father, where the puppy lives a happy, if simple, life until he is presented as a gift to the invalid Elizabeth Barrett, a young poet who lives with her wealthy family in an expensive London home. Here, Flush spends almost all his time in the dark, stuffy bedroom to which his mistress is confined, although they do go on an occasional outing, visiting shops or walking through the park; when outside he is always on a leash, both to keep him under control and to protect him from danger. During this time of almost continual confinement, Flush and his mistress develop a strong bond as they become each other's primary companion. But their relationship is threatened when Elizabeth falls in love with the charming Mr. Browning, and Flush, fearful of any challenger for Miss Barrett's affection, at first tries to drive the interloper away. Soon, however, Flush's love for his mistress outweighs his fear of her lover, and he comes to love Mr. Barrett for the happiness the man's presence brings Elizabeth. Unfortunately, just as Flush has learned to accept the changing situation, disaster strikes and his mistress' love is tested. Flush is taken by dognappers, part of a gang which captures and holds for ransom the beloved pets of wealthy Londoners. When her family tries to prevent Elizabeth from giving in to the villains' demands, she is forced to put her own safety in jeopardy by traveling to the heart of the criminal neighborhood of Whitechapel in order to secure Flush's return. Once Flush's freedom is obtained, Elizabeth seeks her own freedom, from her over-bearing father, in an elopement, running away to Italy with Mr. Barrett, accompanied by a faithful maid and, of course, her beloved dog, Flush. In Italy, as Elizabeth regains her health and strength, her relationship with Flush also

evolves. He is no longer her sole companion, a change which is at first heartbreaking for the little dog, until he discovers a freedom that he never had in London. The freedom to wander allows Flush to adjust to his new place in his mistress' life, and to the addition of a newborn son to the household. Although the family does make one return visit to London, Flush spends most of the rest of his life in Italy, finally passing away, old and content, by his mistress' side.

In addition to the basic story, Woolf puts *Flush* to other purposes as well. Like all her works, the book contains several layers of complexity. Although the story stands on its own, Woolf uses the book to explore several important ideas, including concepts of communication and perception, gender politics, and class status. A common theme in much of Woolf's work was that of the way perception and communication interact. The juxtaposition of a non-verbal protagonist (the dog, Flush) and a woman whose life was in the written word (homebound poet Elizabeth Barrett) provided Woolf an opportunity to play with the way words can both facilitate and hinder communication. The theme of disparate perception also runs through the book. Flush's inability to understand the world around him, specifically the world of his mistress, is often played for laughs, but Woolf also uses the situation to examine how different individuals can experience the same events in complex and often oppositional ways. Together, these two ideas allowed Woolf to explore the way the ability (or inability) to communicate at various levels—verbal, emotional, literary—affects perception.

Another recurring theme Woolf addressed in *Flush* was the way gender shapes understanding and experience. She took the book as an opportunity to address concerns of arbitrary morality, especially gendered morality. In acknowledging Flush's early

sexual dalliances, she observes that “such conduct in a man even, in the year of 1842, would have called for some excuse from a biographer; in a woman no excuse could have availed” (21). Having a protagonist who was situated outside standard morality allowed Woolf to draw attention to what she saw as nonsensically gendered sexual mores. In addition to using *Flush* to critique gendered sexual morality, she also used the book to illustrate broader moral differences between men and women. When Flush is dog-napped and held for ransom, the primary conflict for Elizabeth Barrett is that the men in her life are more concerned with punishing the guilty thieves than with protecting the innocent dog, so that she must fight her father, her brother, her neighbors, and even her future husband in order to secure her pet’s release. Woolf uses the situation to show her audience that even notions of crime and punishment tend to be gendered. Using the dog as an outside observer served as a way for Woolf to shine a light on the construction of gendered morality.

Another idea that runs through the book is that of the problematic nature of class and nobility. Because Flush is “a pure-bred Cocker of the red variety marked by all the characteristic excellences of his kind” (18), he is a noble of high class status, but because he is still a dog, he is simultaneously a lowly creature compared to the humans around him. Again, Flush is observing from outside the hierarchy, even as he occupies designated spaces within it. Woolf uses Flush’s multiple class status levels to illustrate the problematic nature of class hierarchies. She does this by comparing canine and human nobility. In canines, “light eyes, for example, are undesirable; curled ears are still worse; to be born with a light nose or a topknot is nothing less than fatal” (14). Canine nobility is easy to quantify because it is physical. Flush is a “good” spaniel because he has dark

eyes, straight ears, and a well-shaped head with no topknot. Human nobility, on the other hand, is much more difficult to measure. Most people like to think that a person's worth should be measured by traits like honor, bravery, or compassion, rather than superficial details of appearance. But Woolf makes a point of reminding her audience that humans are measured with a different metric entirely: "when we ask what constitutes noble birth—should our eyes be light or dark, our ears curled or straight, are topknots fatal, our judges merely refer us to our coats of arms. You have none perhaps. Then you are nobody" (15). While we value the intangible measures of character, human nobility is really measured by the more arbitrary yardsticks of heritage and money. Woolf applies both canine and human terms to describe the personal failings of Mr. Mitford: "his eyes were light; his ears were curled; his head exhibited the fatal topknot. In other words, he was utterly selfish, recklessly extravagant, worldly, insincere and addicted to gambling" (16-7). By applying both definitions, Woolf reminds her audience that these character traits—selfishness, extravagance, etc.—are not provable in the way physical traits are, and also that these character traits are not the usual measure of human nobility because they have no monetary value and are not tied to a coat of arms. By analyzing human character through both canine and societal standards of nobility, Woolf illustrates the arbitrary and contrived nature of both definitions.

The themes Woolf explores in *Flush* are ideas that had fascinated Woolf for some time. She was already well-known for her interests in interior experience, and writing about a subject whose every experience was inherently interior, as he had no language to share his experiences with anyone else, provided a unique perspective on one of Woolf's primary literary concerns. Although her delving into interior existence may have been

Woolf's most groundbreaking contribution to literature, her canon is often now recognized primarily for its feminist undertones. Although Woolf never called herself a feminist, her writings have provided rich fodder for those looking for writing that shows a true understanding of women's experiences. Despite that same theme of gendered experience that runs through *Flush*, the modern canon often neglects the book as being simplistic or unsophisticated. Modern critics have often passed over the book because it can be read and even appreciated without digging into the deeper implications. Even without the concerns of gender politics and musings on the subjectivity of experience, the book still contains drama and love, sex and danger. It can easily be read as the light, entertaining afternoon read it has so often been dismissed as.

Although, on the surface, *Flush* seems to be a simple, sweet story, it also contains a great deal of depth. Like *Orlando* before it, *Flush* is a biography with a point; while it does, in fact, present a life, it also does a great deal more. Many readers have connected to the obvious commentary about the power structures between men and women in Victorian England. To those who don't generally look at humor as a complex rhetorical structure, "the personal and general resonances of *Flush*'s tale make the novel 'a joke' only in the deep psychological sense, as unconscious truth-telling" (Squier 124). And while humor certainly has that aspect to it, that grounding in often-unspoken reality, some thoughtful critics "take issue with the usual critical response to all this: that *Flush* can be *dismissed* as a diversion, something not to be taken seriously, not worth one's time" (Caughie 52). As *Orlando* proved, Woolf can use a joke of this length to present a biography in a manner that conveys both the facts of the life and the truth of the personality. In *Flush*, Woolf creates a New Biography by using signifiers of biographical

conventions and signifiers of fictional conventions in a dynamic relationship in a joke structure that allows the two sides of the story to coexist without cancelling each other out.

Play Frame

As with *Orlando*, Woolf needed to keep her audience focused on the way *Flush* was constructed in order to set up a play frame around it; this foundation kept the audience from being able to settle comfortably into any one set of generic conventions. Like *Orlando*, the book required a careful balance. Too much factuality would render the dog's perspective awkward and nonsensical, and too much fiction would render the truths unreliable. Woolf struck this balance by reversing the tactic she'd used in *Orlando*. In her first New Biography, Woolf set up the opposition of fact and fiction by using strong biographical conventions to convey the fantastical elements and poetic language to describe biographical facts. In *Flush*, Woolf applies biographical conventions around Flush, rather than to him. For facts she relied on documented resources, and "for fiction she relied upon her subject and his unique angle of perception" (Lewis, "Biographies" (306). It could be argued that this choice was really about the facts that Woolf had to work with; because Flush, of course, left no personal records behind, the only facts she had about his life were the facts of the humans around him. But *Orlando* is proof that Woolf had no qualms about inventing sources when she was working in fiction. In the case of *Flush*, she chose to use truth because she was already working with the inherent fiction of writing a dog's point of view, and she required facts to balance the work. She was also careful with the placement of her factual references in *Flush*. Even when her sources provide insight into Flush's experiences, they never interrupt the flow of his

narrative. Where *Orlando* was a real perspective presented fictionally, *Flush* is a fictional perspective presented factually because the main character is a dog, whose inner thoughts must inherently be hypothesized by the author.

The biographical conventions in *Flush* are conveyed in two ways that are noticeably scarce or absent in *Orlando*: specific dates and locations, and factual (as opposed to fictionalized) documentation. Specifics are notoriously absent from *Orlando*, as much of what the character represents is too universal to be restricted to a single year. In *Flush*, however, dates become, perhaps, even more specific than the biographical records justify. Despite her admission that many of the important days of Flush's life were not recorded, Woolf still provides as much detail as she can in the calendar of Flush's life: he was given to Elizabeth "in the early summer of the year 1842" (23), he first met Mr. Browning "on Tuesday, the 21st of May," in fact "it was half-past two" (63), and he was dognapped on "the morning of Tuesday the 1st of September" (82). Flush's life is also situated in real locations. The Barretts don't just live in a wealthy London neighborhood; they live at Number 50, Wimpole Street. This is the real address at which the Barrett family resided, and in which Flush lived with his mistress. Because Flush's perspective is inherently fictional, Woolf balances it with real dates and places gleaned from the letters of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.

In addition to grounding Flush's life using specific dates and locations, Woolf also uses real documentation to describe the life and situations in which Flush and his companions lived. His first mistress, Miss Mitford, is quoted directly from a letter: "I have not bought a bonnet, a cloak, a gown, hardly a pair of gloves," she wrote in 1842, 'for four years'" (22). After Flush attacks Mr. Browning out of jealousy for Ms. Barrett's

affection, Woolf quotes the letters in which the two discuss the incident: “At last I said ‘If you are good, Flush, you may come and say that you are sorry,’... That was her account of the matter to Mr. Browning; and he of course replied ‘Oh, poor Flush, do you think I do not love and respect him for his jealous supervision—his slowness to know another, having once known you?’” (72-3). The human lovers’ understanding of the situation is presented, not just in dialogue, but in direct quotes from the couple’s published letters. Woolf may have been comfortable fabricating sources in *Orlando*, but *Flush* draws not just on the letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, but also on the writings of others in their circle as well. By surrounding Flush’s experiences with these factual sources, Woolf lends their authority to Flush’s more subjective experiences.

While Woolf relies on real documentation and context of Flush’s life to provide the granite weight of truth for the story, she needed balance to create a joke with the book, and “In order to make it a joke, the biographical focus was displaced from the human to the dog” (Griffiths 164). The human subject is generally considered to be Elizabeth Barrett Browning, although Woolf makes it clear that Flush has an interior existence entirely separate from that of his mistress. Flush’s perspective contributed to Woolf’s literary efforts in two primary ways. First, it “drew on the resources of modernist narration to broaden the scope of life writing—in part by grafting onto biographical discourse modes of consciousness presentation conventionally associated with fictional narratives” (Herman 547); in this case, the “mode of consciousness presentation” that would generally be considered fiction was the presentation of a dog’s point of view on an equal plain to human experience. Engaging in Flush’s perspective allowed Woolf to experiment with new ways of understanding everyday experiences. The second way

Flush's perspective served Woolf's purposes was that it provided the rainbow to balance the granite—it provided an inherent fiction to temper the hard facts of the story. Woolf set the fiction of Flush's perspective in opposition to the biographical facts by focusing on differences of communication and of sensation.

Because his mistress is an author and a poet, communication, or the lack thereof, is a fundamental part of the relationship between Flush and Elizabeth Barrett. Woolf uses differences in communication to set Flush's perspective in opposition to the human point of view. From their first meeting, "Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb" (31). Woolf draws attention to this gulf by assigning dialogue only to humans, but still gives Flush a level of understanding that seems to negate the distance between him and his mistress. While Elizabeth is often quoted, given dialogue, Flush's thoughts are conveyed without the use of direct dialogue. Dogs are given direct dialogue in only one place in the book, as they discuss their hierarchy among themselves: "his suspicions were confirmed by snatches of talk held in passing with the dogs of Wimpole Street. 'See that scallywag? A mere mongrel!...By gad, that's a fine Spaniel. One of the best blood in Britain!...Pity his ears aren't a shade more curly....There's a topknot for you!'" (39). But even this dialogue is set apart from the human dialogue in the book. It is unattributed; there is no reference to which dog speaks which line. There is no way to be sure that any of these words came from Flush. Furthermore, the language is an echo of Woolf's discussion of canine nobility (14-5), which references the rules of the Spaniel Club—the body that defines the attributes of the various spaniel breeds. By avoiding attributing the words to any specific dog, and by echoing the language of human definitions of breed traits, Woolf sets even this single

example of canine dialogue apart from the human conversations that litter the book. Instead of using the passage to give dogs a voice, Woolf uses it to direct humor (and possibly derision) at the idea of nobility; the ideas that are so important to dog breeders sound absurd coming from the canines.

Flush's inability to communicate gives rise to many misunderstandings, which adds a layer of abstraction between the reader and the dog. These misunderstandings are sometimes points of comedic relief, such as Flush's grand stand against Robert Browning, an epic event as Flush gears up for his attack, which is promptly laughed off by his foe. But the misunderstandings also serve to alienate the reader from the protagonist. When Elizabeth Barrett sneaks away in the company of her faithful maid and her beloved dog, Flush is excited that they are fleeing from the dreaded dognappers who nearly cost him his life. The reader, however, knows that the criminals of Whitechapel are the last thing on Elizabeth Barrett's mind as she elopes with her new husband. By making sure that the reader knows something the main character does not, Woolf forces her audience to identify with the secondary character of Flush's mistress, rather than the protagonist. This separation creates a layer of understanding between the levels of the story—Flush's experiences may be laid out directly, but the audience is connecting to the implied experiences of his mistress. This layer of abstraction supports the play frame because it keeps the audience from experiencing the book on a single, straightforward level.

The other tool Woolf uses to set up the fiction side of the play frame is her focus on Flush's sensations—particularly the sense of smell. Because a human's primary senses are sight and hearing, Woolf's focus on Flush's sense of smell, a perfectly natural focus

when writing a dog's life, continued to alienate his perspective from the audience even as he provided the story's primary point of view. When Flush first arrives at the Barrett household, "he was more astonished by what he smelt than what he saw...warm whiffs of joints roasting...Mixing with the smell of food were further smells...of cedarwood and sandalwood and mahogany; scents of male bodies and female bodies" (26). His first walk through London is characterized the same way: "the whole battery of a London street on a hot summer's day assaulted his nostrils. He smelt the swooning smells that lie in the gutters; the bitter smells that corrode iron railings; the fuming, heady smells that rise from basements" (37). The language, used in sections of the book which traditional biographies would quote about factually from letters or journals, is instead poetic. This poetically written focus on the protagonist's inhuman experiences of sensation is a way for Woolf to create separation between *Flush* and the reader. The separation contributes to the play frame and allows the paradoxes of the book to fully develop.

Paradox

Woolf uses a mix of genre conventions to keep her audience focused on the construction of *Flush*, but it is the way she twists the two genres together that creates the paradox of the book's joke structure. This structure is made up of two primary paradoxes, both related to the book's perspective. The most obvious paradox is that of communication and understanding—if Flush cannot communicate with his mistress, how does he understand her?—while the other paradox is more subtle and easily overlooked, resulting from the inherent metaphor of communicating Flush's observations.

Throughout the book, Woolf sets Flush's ability to communicate apart from human communication, but she is careful to avoid letting it lose power by focusing on

Flush's ability to understand his mistress without words. As Elizabeth plans her elopement with Robert Browning, "Flush could not read what she was writing an inch or two above his head. But he knew just as well as if he could read every word, how strangely his mistress was agitated as she wrote" (62). Flush cannot speak to his mistress, and her words mean little or nothing to him. The gulf between them is still there, but the inability to communicate is not connected to an inability to understand. Flush is able to decipher his mistress' feelings without words, and it isn't just Elizabeth's emotions that Flush can understand without words. He understands the rules of society: "Without being able to decipher a word of the placard at the Gate, he had learnt his lesson—in Regent's Park dogs must be led on chains" (38-9). Although Woolf states that Flush's inability to use words creates "the widest gulf that can separate one being from another," the actual progress of Flush's life shows that this gulf does not keep him from understanding his mistress' mind better, perhaps, than any person in her life, nor does it keep him from understanding the human society he is living in. By attributing dialogue to humans, but never fully to Flush, Woolf establishes the fiction of his perspective, but by showing the audience that the gulf she claims exists does not in any way inhibit Flush's understanding of the people around him, Woolf complicates the fictional nature of his perspective.

Woolf creates the paradox through self-contradiction. Despite claiming that Flush cannot understand his mistress, and weaving fundamental misunderstandings, like his belief that leaving Wimpole Street is an attempt to evade dognappers, into Flush's experiences, Woolf contradicts her words by attributing a level of understanding to Flush that is often denied to other characters. For instance, following Elizabeth's first meeting with Robert Browning, her father comes to check on her, and "Flush marvelled at his obtuseness...He

noticed nothing. He suspected nothing” (65-6). Elizabeth’s father, who can understand her words, is completely oblivious to something that will forever change the trajectory of his daughter’s life. Flush’s inability to use language gives him greater insight. Woolf states that “the widest gulf” exists between one who can speak and one who cannot, but she also wonders, through Elizabeth, “Do not words destroy the symbol that lies beyond the reach of words?” (45-6). Words can be used to share truth, but they can also be used to conceal it. Flush’s inability to use and understand words creates both distance, because he cannot understand the things his mistress would tell him, and closeness, because her unspoken communication cannot contain lies. One of the primary paradoxes lays in the complexities of communication and understanding that develop throughout the book.

Although the problematic nature of language is made clear throughout *Flush*, there is another paradox that runs through the whole of the story but often remains invisible. On the surface, it seems obvious that a dog’s sense of smell would be an important part of his perspective, but there is another rhetorical aspect to consider. Because of the way humans talk about scent, “verbal translations of smell lend an effect of intertextual artifice as much as they provoke a reader’s recollected sensation” (Booth 3). This is because almost all human descriptions of scent are metaphor and simile. While an object can be described, in sight terms, with words other than itself—references to shape, color, texture, brightness, etc.—most smells are described only in reference to the things that produce them. Saying, for instance, “the room smelled of boiled cabbage” relies on the audience to know what boiled cabbage smells like. Most of Flush’s experiences are described, to some degree, with smells, but, when that is translated into human terms, “the most precise vocabulary for a smell can only resort to metaphor, or to

names for the objects that cause the smell, or to similes of other smells or senses” (Booth 5). This fact of our capacity to describe smell means that all these descriptions of Flush’s experiences are inherently set out in figurative language. Woolf drops a hint to her audience in the story when she points out that “Where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see...there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell” (137). She admits that, as Flush’s biographer, she has no words to translate many of Flush’s experiences. She struggles for words that don’t exist, like the young poet Orlando, frustrated at trying to describe the color green (*Orlando* 13-4). At this admission of defeat, the reader must acknowledge that all such descriptions must be lacking, with resort to metaphor where the granite of truth fails Woolf’s purposes.

In *Orlando*, Woolf used figurative and poetic language to describe the hardest biographical facts that she had available, and resorted to the conventional language of biography as she wove in the more colorful and fantastical elements. In *Flush*, she attempted to use the granite-like conventions of biography to support the story that surrounded Flush’s life, while using figurative and poetic language to convey the rainbow of his personal experiences. A likely reason the paradoxical nature of this figurative language has generally been overlooked is that it is so commonplace that readers don’t recognize descriptions of scent as poetic language. For this sense in particular, metaphor and simile are standard, considered perfectly acceptable even in forms of writing that do not usually allow for any such figurative language. Despite the hints Woolf dropped in *Flush*, many readers simply failed to see the inherent contradiction, and, because the book made for a perfectly enjoyable story even without the added layer of meaning, they have often missed the deeper structures of what Woolf was trying to do.

Punch Line

The last chapter of *Flush* is titled, fittingly, “The End.” This last chapter is the punch line of *Flush*’s joke structure, where Woolf allows the paradoxes she has created to resolve—not by simplifying or negating the opposition, but by making it dynamic. In resolving both the primary paradoxes—communication and genre convention—Woolf allows the two sides of both equations to represent each other, creating balance in the book as a whole.

The problem of communication is resolved in the section of the final chapter during which Elizabeth becomes enamored of the supernatural. During the Browning family’s time in Florence, a fad developed among the middle and upper classes for holding séances during which spirits would knock on and shake the table around which a group of supplicants was gathered. During one such gathering at the Browning home, the dog becomes confused because “whatever the ladies and gentlemen round the table could hear and see, Flush could hear and see nothing. True, the table was standing on one leg, but so tables will if you lean hard on one side” (161-2). Throughout the book, Flush’s inability to communicate caused him to misunderstand situations, unless words themselves were being used to obscure meaning, as when Elizabeth’s father was unaware of his daughter’s plans to escape his control. But in the punch line to the story, Elizabeth is the one whose perspective is limited; Flush sees the plain truth: the table was leaning because the excited attendees were leaning on it. Now Flush sees the truth while Elizabeth misunderstands the situation. Woolf’s tactic for paradox resolution—allowing

the two sides to take on each other's definitions while remaining in opposition—plays out when Elizabeth's human viewpoint, with its access to all the learning put into words, becomes the unreliable, while Flush's canine viewpoint, reliant only on observations, cuts through to the logic of the situation.

Flush's ability to understand what fools his mistress resolves the paradox of communication, but Woolf allows Elizabeth Barrett-Browning herself to resolve the paradox of genre convention that set the whole joke structure in motion to begin with. She does this by inserting a poem Elizabeth wrote about Flush during his lifetime into the book. "Flush or Faunus?" is a poem Elizabeth wrote about Flush while still living at Wimpole Street, comparing him to a deity in thanks for his ability to pull her out of her deep depression. If Woolf had mentioned the poem chronologically, during the part of her subject's life when it was written, it would have come in the second chapter. She instead chose to insert the poem into the final paragraph of the book because it had a particular rhetorical resonance. In *Orlando*, Woolf provided a resolution to the paradox of genre convention—fact and fiction—by crafting a scene that represented both. In *Flush*, such a resolution was readily made. The poem has always been considered the most powerful tool for conveying the sublime, the highest of mental states, the rainbow of the soul. Woolf chose to include a poem which had been written specifically to exalt her subject's inner nature, the light in him that had so changed his mistress' life. It is the perfect representation of the fiction needed to convey personality. At the same time it is hard truth. Woolf did not invent this poem to invest her character with the light of personality. It is a biographical fact of Flush's life that this poem was written about him. As such, it is the sort of detail which no traditional biography could ignore. Woolf takes

advantage of the fact that her subject inspired such a work to create a passage that was simultaneously a perfect example of the tools of fiction, and a record of biographical fact. The two sides are brought into balance, even as they both stand on their own.

Conclusion

While many women's books were ignored or dismissed in their own time, then rediscovered and appreciated by later generations, *Flush* "was Woolf's most popular book during her lifetime, but it has subsequently become her most neglected" (Craig Smith 348). When it was first released, *Flush* was popular but not critically acclaimed because the story was only read at surface level; the deeper meanings were lost on much of the audience. Modern critics have often overlooked *Flush* for the same reasons that the book was popular in Woolf's own time: it is easy to read the book as a light, child-like story and overlook the deeper implications. When the book is mentioned in modern criticism on Woolf, it is described in much the same way as it was originally, and "these persistently recurring adjectives—'sentimental,' 'minor,' 'trivial'—are disturbingly redolent of the terms by which women's writings were once dismissed as suitable subjects for critical study, and by which women's lives were dismissed as suitable subjects for biography" (Craig Smith 357-8). Even modern critics commonly overlook the fact that all the aspects of the book that make it a "traditionally feminine" work such as the unusual protagonist, the focus on interior experiences, and the power of the love story are intentional rhetorical strategies Woolf employs for specific purposes, making her point that morality and other measures of human worth are largely based on arbitrary gender constructs.

Because *Flush* is an enjoyable story even without acknowledging the deeper meanings, those deeper meanings can be lost, which is why the joke structure is so important: the joke allows the complexity to function without getting in the way of the pleasure of the story. More importantly, the joke structure of the book is part of the complexity of the book, so the silliness and fiction on the surface cannot be ignored without taking away from the deeper meanings of the book: “the dismissal of the joke for the serious truth beneath...unwittingly perpetuates the value system used to trivialize much women’s writing and popular fiction” (Caughie 61). These assumptions about what defines the difference between literature and popular fiction have made it difficult for even modern scholars to deal with everything that *Flush* represents. The critic who sees only the social commentary on the relative power relationships between men and women misses the eloquence and art that Woolf put into crafting *Flush*’s viewpoint. Likewise, the reader who sees only the fiction can enjoy the book without ever realizing the deeper meaning. Only by valuing the joke structure that shapes the book can we really appreciate the groundbreaking work that *Flush* is.

VI. CONCLUSION

Woolf first presented her call for a new form of biography while reviewing Harold Nicolson's *Some People*, but the person she was calling to action was herself. In writing *Orlando* and *Flush*, Woolf created a genre that was part biography and part novel. Fusing the paradox resolution structure common to the novel—the traditional woman's genre—with the traditional biography, freed the author to use the tools of fiction to create a true account of a personality as no existing biography had done to Woolf's satisfaction. Although she proposed her "New Biography" while reviewing a man's work, the new type of biography she was seeking was one which could be wielded by a woman author to present a person's life, whether a man or a woman, in the way that women write about people.

Woolf clearly laid out her hypothesis about the novel as the woman's writing form in *A Room of One's Own*. Allowing her audience the assumption that the novel is primarily a study of a character or group of characters, Woolf pointed out that a middle class woman's life had generally required her to become an expert at the study of individual personalities, as her role was primarily that of a caretaker—of her husband, her children, her aging parents, her guests. Caretaking requires the ability to understand another person's mind well enough to understand what they want, how that might clash with what they need, and which to favor—all without being explicitly being told. Because women were trained from childhood to consider other people's thoughts and feelings, character's thoughts and feelings would be a natural path for their writing to take. Woolf also believed that the novel was the form that gave women the most freedom to write because it was a young format when compared to the epic poem or the sonnet or

the philosophical treatise, all of which had been set for hundreds of years. There is not an old way and a new way to write in these formats, but a right way and a wrong way.

Because the novel was still evolving, and perhaps because it was still not taken very seriously, it was a form that could still be changed and experimented with. An author could twist the format to fit her own thoughts, rather than twisting her thoughts into the existing form.

Although the women (and men) writing novels may never have intended it, the joke structure is actually a relatively common organizing structure for a novel. Novels that are described as “climactic” may be the most obvious illustrations. The reason literary novels are studied is that they contain more meaning than what sits on the surface. The audience is often unsure as the story unfolds how all the pieces are going to come together—the paradoxes come into conflict—until the author shows the readers something they didn’t know before that resolves the dissonance—the punch line. Most literary works, in all genres, rely to some extent on people as tropes or symbols; common examples are the wise old teacher or the whore/thief with the heart of gold. Unlike older genres, however, novels seek to move beyond symbolic or stereotypical characters—they are praised when characters transcend the symbolic and become real to the reader, and they do so *without* losing the symbolism. The goal of the novel is to create characters that can exist simultaneously as symbols (any of the stock characters like the Wise Woman and the Bold Hero) and as real people (even if they aren’t). When characters take on that kind of depth, they become paradoxical, embodying both the symbol—which is inherently a simplification—and the personality—which is inherently complex. The author who writes such a character must find a way to resolve the paradox between the

simplistic surface of the character—what he does and where he goes—and the highly complex individual underneath. Woolf sought a way to bring this paradox to biography while writing *Orlando* and *Flush*. In both books she combined the genre conventions of biography with the genre conventions of the novel, and the combination of the two proved to be a catalyst for creating characters who could serve both as accurate representations of real people and as symbols in higher literary goals—commentary on the subjectivity of individual experience, especially gendered experience.

Because Woolf had accepted the novel as the women's writing form, so to speak, it makes sense that this form would serve as a starting point for women's writing as it branched out. While looking through a shelf of works by modern women, Woolf observed that "though novels predominate, novels themselves may very well have changed from association with books of a different feather" (*Room 78*). But if novels could be changed by coming into contact with other forms, perhaps the established genres could be equally affected. In writing *Orlando* and *Flush*, it can be argued that Woolf novelized biography much more than she imitated biography in a novel. By allowing the two genres to mix, she created a sub-genre with the novel's truth of personality and the biography's truth of facts. Critics have generally read the two books as novels, much the same way as her other literary works, and in a completely different fashion than her non-fiction writing. But to read *Orlando* and *Flush* simply as novels is to miss the complexity of what Woolf was attempting to achieve. By understanding these books as part of a more complex generic sub-section, we may find new connections between worldly concerns Woolf addressed in her non-fiction writing, such as politics and gender equality, and her artistic concentration on the interior experience of the human existence.

She claimed in *A Room of One's Own* that integrity in a novelist was the ability to convince the reader that the events and actions she wrote were true, no matter how fantastical or unexpected they may have been. Her novelistic integrity allowed her to write a novel with a biography's weight of authority and enough truth to justify its inclusion in the genre, and in the process she created a new type of biography, one which gave women writers the space to write biography without trying to imitate men who write biography. By using the rhetorical structure of a joke to write lives, she was able to meld the facts of history with the fictions of personality without losing either.

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