# THE LYRICISM OF *THE VOYAGE OUT*

**Irina-Ana DROBOT**
Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest

*Abstract: Is Virginia Woolf's The Voyage Out a traditional or experimental novel? The aim of this article is to show that this novel contains features of both. Judging from some of its features and themes, it can be analysed in the same way that one might analyse poetry. Woolf's use of previously known texts, especially Romantic lyric poetry, but also other poems and plays, will be examined in order to see when and how they are used to create a lyrical novel. The Voyage Out revels in a freedom for the mixture of various literary genres. Woolf uses this mixture to bring the lyrical aspect into the foreground, especially when characters reflect about life. Multiple perspectives on what happens in the novel resonate with the view common in poetry that a character's personality is fragmented, not coherent. The symbolic dimension of characters achieving a coherent vision on life through communication or other experiences again resonates with poetry.*

*Keywords: lyrical novel, water, tragedy, isolation, Romanticism.*

Is Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* a traditional or experimental novel? The aim of this article is to show that this novel contains features of both. Judging from some of its features and themes, it can be analysed in the same way that one might analyse poetry. Woolf's use of previously known texts, especially Romantic lyric poetry, but also other poems and plays, will be examined in order to see when and how they are used to create a lyrical novel. Woolf herself states of this kind of novel that it "will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, but not a play. It will be read, not acted…" (Woolf 2008: 80)

Stella McNichol, in *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction*, notices poetic features in the *Voyage Out*, a novel otherwise described as traditional. McNichol claims that, in this novel, ordinary incidents such as a dance or a picnic have a symbolic dimension which offers a new layer of meaning to the plot. Anthony Domestico points out "the temporary unit" of the participants at the picnic. They are different people brought together by this temporary moment of communion. Domestico likens this scene to similar scenes in other novels where people are united: at Mrs. Dalloway's party (in *Mrs. Dalloway*) or at Mrs. Ramsay's dinner (in *To the Lighthouse*). There, according to Domestico, characters from various social backgrounds are brought together by their hosts for a brief moment of unity. Such scenes are poetic due to the focus on characters' reflections on the subject of coherence. What is more, as characters' feelings become the focus of these scenes, time is no longer experienced through action, but through reflection. The action is slowed down and left in the background as reflections and feelings are brought to the foreground.

The scene at the beginning of *The Voyage Out* is at times dynamic (there is dialogue and there are exterior incidents) and at times seemingly static (when the narrative becomes more reflective). The static aspect of the narrative is due to the expansion of time. Incidents which, objectively, would not last for a long time are given extended attention in the novel. Time, in Müller's terms, is not compressed but expanded, in the sense that brief moments are given a large space on the written page and, as a result, take more of the reader's time.



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The ending of this novel differs from that of a traditional novel. However, as is often the case in traditional novels, the flashbacks are easy to follow and the explanations of the characters' reflections are not always stream-of-consciousness (Pratap Singh 2004: 141), while the poetic language is represented "in embryonic form" (Pratap Singh 2004: 142). By reflecting, characters offer a lyrical perception of everyday life.

Inner reflections form the basis for the lyrical novel. Bradbury supports this view when he states that the modernist novel focuses on the inner workings of the mind (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991: 393). Unity of plot is ensured by "… a reflector or focalizer" (Onega 1996: 19). In *The Voyage Out*, the lyrical monologues of all characters are presented through a third-person narrator's perspective.

Isolation is a theme that is dominant in much of Modernist literature: Woolf chooses to focus on the isolation of the individual brought about by modern society. Isolation is also a commonly found trope in Romantic lyric poetry, with the poet or, more generally, the artist, feeling lonely in society. That is what prompts him to confess in the lyrical mode, as do the characters in the lyrical novel. Maida Long, in *The bitter glass: demonic imagery in the novels of Virginia Woolf* (1975) notices this theme in *The Years*, but it applies to all of Woolf's novels. In *The Voyage Out*, characters sometimes talk without having anything meaningful to say, and without achieving any sort of personal connection with others. Rachel is described as a silent young woman. She realizes that verbal communication is not honest: "It appeared that nobody ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked about a feeling they felt, but that was what music was for." (Woolf 2006: 29). Rachel does not express her feelings for Terence to her aunt Helen. She just talks to herself and the reader is her only audience. Rachel feels alone in a crowd, in the sense that she does not feel understood:

She felt herself surrounded, like a child at a party, by the faces of strangers all hostile to her, with hooked noses and sneering, indifferent eyes.

Rachel's isolation prompts her to experience moments of vision. She is isolated in her own reality and experiences incidents differently from the others. Like a poet, or Romantic visionary, she experiences various states of intense emotions, and she even hallucinates in the end. Walker clarifies the issue of Rachel's isolation by placing her in her own social and historical context. Her death is interpreted as a result of her inability to adapt to the new situations she has to face:

Rachel as an out of time, out of place heroine does not fit into her surroundings emotionally, physically, or intellectually. She is not like the other characters, she feels apart from them and they sense this, she does not communicate well with them, and she has intense aversions to what her contemporaries consider the normal life for a young woman. […] in the end Woolf has no choice but to write Rachel's death because Rachel never finds the time or place where she fits in. (Walker 1998:1).

Woolf attempted to break away from the traditional marriage plot of the type portrayed in Jane Austen's novels. Woolf turns the story's focus away from the narrative, towards a dark mood composed of Rachel's moments of vision. These will end with the heroine's death, resulting from her inability to fit in or to find anything meaningful in the world. Even though she experiences moments of vision, these isolated moments are not enough to give coherence to her chaotic world. Even her moments of vision largely consist of a dark view of the external world, since they anticipate death (Galbiati and Harris 2010: 70).

Rachel's isolation is always connected to a poetic and tragic view of life. For the Romantics, solitude was coupled with the idea of sociability, in the sense that a balance was



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supposed to be achieved between public and private lives. Here Rachel fails at finding this balance, and this lack of symmetry is, in the end, her fatal flaw

But because Romanticism also inherited the 18th-century idea of social sympathy, Romantic solitude existed in a dialectical relationship with sociability […] (Deresiewicz 2009)

Rachel's story is in accord with the Modernist understanding of the idea of solitude:

Modernism decoupled this dialectic. Its notion of solitude was harsher, more adversarial, more isolating. […] the soul, self-enclosed and inaccessible to others, can't choose but be alone. (Deresiewicz 2009)

Communication problems are at the base of the characters' issues. Both Terence and Rachel realize that there is no honest communication possible between them. Such problems can come from the insufficiency of language to express and understand reality. Terence discusses with Hirst: "what's the use of attempting to write when the world's peopled by such damned fools? Seriously Hewet, I advise you to give up literature. What's the good of it? There's your audience." St. John Hirst's isolation leads him to feel excluded and to wonder what other characters are thinking. He finds himself comparing his own feelings and self-worth with the happiness he imagines in others:

But St. John thought that they were saying things which they did not want him to hear, and was led to think of his own isolation. These people were happy, and in some ways he despised them for being made happy so simply, and in other ways he envied them. He was much more remarkable than they were, but he was not happy.

Even the place where characters find themselves serves as a pretext for lyricism. Place is composed not only of the physical location, but also of a certain atmosphere. Places are seen through the characters' perception. They can be regarded as a setting for characters' thoughts. Poetry lines serve to resonate with characters' moods. Rachel is presented during a moment of reflection over a few lines from *Tristan*:

Her eyes were fixed so steadily upon a ball on the rail of the ship that she would have been startled and annoyed if anything had chanced to obscure it for a second. She had begun her meditations with a shout of laughter, caused by the following translation from *Tristan*:

*In shrinking trepidation*
*His shame he seems to hide*
*While to the king his relation*
*He brings the corpse-like Bride.*
*Seems it so senseless what I say?*
She cried that it did, and threw down the book.

Before the lines appear in the story's presentation, Rachel's mood and personality are briefly revealed, then intensified. She is presented as reflective and sensitive. Lucio P. Ruotolo, in *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf's Novels* (1986), sees Rachel as disengaged from the world. Indeed, she appears isolated in social settings. In this episode she looks for answers to her questions in books, and reacts to the lines she reads by laughing. Ruotolo (1986) and Susan Stanford Friedman, in *Spatialization, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's The Voyage Out. Ambiguous Discourse* (1996: 109-135) refer to Rachel as



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the heroine in a failed buildungsroman. These lines bring immediate insight into Rachel's character. During the trip she remains isolated, having trouble communicating with the world. The "corpse-like Bride" is an allusion to the novel's ending.

In Chapter XXV, there are clearly two embedded texts in the main fabula which echo and finally interfere with one another. The first embedded text is the scene between Terence and Rachel. Terence reads some lines from Milton which echo Rachel's thoughts regarding Terence's love. The fictional place found in Milton interferes with the characters' physical setting. The fictional place creates a lyrical atmosphere, to the point where the fictional, imaginary place eclipses the real-life place, making it fade both for the characters and for the readers. One love story echoes another. In this way, readers and characters alike make their own associations with previous texts in order to make sense of the reality of the characters in *The Voyage Out*. Rachel appears to sympathize with the characters in *Comus*, a poem by Milton, and to identify with the female character. She borrows the poem's setting since it better expresses her own inner reality, her own emotional states, and her own personality. Like the Romantic poets, Rachel recreates reality with the help of her imagination and the place she chooses for expressing herself will be a reflection of her self-image. In this way she can make herself feel at one with her surroundings, a habit the Romantics ascribed to. However, the process here is a bit different: rather than adapting to a real-life place, Rachel chooses an imaginary place from literature that resonates with her emotions. Readers perceive this imaginary place as part of Rachel. Rachel comes to feel that the poem is about her feelings and about her love story with Terence. She reacts to the poem with great intensity. The imaginary place is chosen to echo this reaction.

Many books had been tried and then let fall, and now Terence was reading Milton aloud, because he said the words of Milton had substance and shape, so that it was not necessary to understand what he was saying; one could merely listen to his words; one could almost handle them.

*There is a gentle nymph not far from hence*,
he read,
*That with moist curb sways the smooth Severn stream.*
*Sabrina is her name* […]

The words, in spite of what Terence had said, seemed to be laden with meaning, and perhaps it was for this reason that it was painful to listen to them; they sounded strange; they meant different things from what they usually meant.

The imaginary place from Milton's poem is not described in detail. However, it creates an image for readers based on their knowledge of previous texts. Readers will apply the grid of interpretation of imagery regarding nature and water that they already have in place. Rachel's story echoes Sabrina's from Milton's poem. Sabrina is a deity from Milton's *Comus*; she lives in the depths and is associated with fertility rites and purity. The water imagery present in the novel is also found in these lines. One place echoes another, with all its associations related to water symbolism. The depths where Sabrina lives suggest isolation, which echoes Rachel's own isolation with the impossibility of true communication, or of genuine, close emotional relationships. At the same time, the fact that water is part of the places where both Sabrina and Rachel are found in their evolution as personalities says something about their progress in life. Water is fluid, just as their personalities are depicted as being in a process of change. Sabrina's purity echoes Rachel, who is inexperienced in her voyage on the sea. For Sabrina, water is her place, her home, while for Rachel it is a place of travelling. For Rachel, water is an element of freedom, which involves independence, danger, and a necessity for growth and change. For Sabrina, it is her own element. Water is part of



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Sabrina as well as of Rachel. However, water as part of Sabrina's personality shows us that she is from another realm, while Rachel moves towards another realm as she voyages across the sea.

Water imagery contributes to the idea that the characters' personalities are fluid. The image of water is ambivalent and contradictory, just like the characters. It is, moreover, linked to characters' personality. Characters use water in their thoughts about themselves and in their inner reflections. Water is an enduring metaphor for life or death and for transitory experiences.

Water becomes part of Rachel's understanding of her own personality. For Rachel, the sea means independence, yet it is not a sort of independence that she desires. Independence is not viewed as a pleasant adventure, but as a scary one. Water is seen as both protective and treacherous. The characters that reflect on water as both peaceful and dangerous are ambivalent when it comes to life. Even as we think of water as a means of escape, the meaning is ambivalent, as this escape may be an escape in the form of a peaceful daydream or in the form of death. When seen as a form of peaceful escape, water signifies a retreat into the inner world. The experience is expressed in a lyrical form. The image of water accompanies characters during various stages of their lives and during various moments of reflection.

Rachel has an epiphany, where she compares herself with the sea:

> The vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind, flashed into Rachel's mind, and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living. (Woolf 84)

Here the setting is both real and imaginary, in the sense that Rachel is physically close to the sea while on her voyage by ship and also because she begins to project her emotions on the sea and thus describe it in the same way that she describes herself. Her journey on the sea can be interpreted as a journey of self-discovery and independence (she moves towards maturity during her trip). Rachel Vinrace, twenty-four years old, does not know much about life. Her aunt Helen will teach her "how to live." Rachel does not seem to wish for independence very much. She is learning about life, yet her personal journey ends in death. Ernest Dempsey, in *The Voyage Out by Virginia Woolf* (2007), states that during her voyage on the sea, Rachel

> […] is simply not a *woman* yet. […] As the voyage proceeds, Rachel's own transformation towards becoming a woman progresses on a minutely conscious level. The symbolic voyage of the book's title starts an inevitable clock going, every tick of which pushes Rachel a little out of her 'person'.

The sea, while offering independence, also offers escape. According to Roger Poole (1978: 266),

> Water is the dissolution of the self in something greater than the self. Water is the great forgiver, the great receiver, the great lover, the great divine element which makes all argument unnecessary and all strife unimportant. Water was the call to death itself.

Rachel dies after her journey of self-discovery, during which we witness, according to Ernest Dempsey (2007), the "transition of Rachel's being towards womanhood". Before her death, while she lies ill in bed, Rachel has a "reverie", as Roger Poole (1978: 266-267) claims:



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The heat was suffocating. At last the faces went further away; she fell into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head. She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head. While all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea. There she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then someone turned her over at the bottom of the sea.

The tragic side of the story is underlined by the water symbolism. As she lies in her bed, Rachel associates water with unpleasant moments. Another moment while Rachel lies ill in bed and which is connected to water has to do with a release from responsibilities:

On this day indeed Rachel was conscious of what went on round her. She had come to the surface of the dark, sticky pool, and a wave seemed to bear her up and down with it; she had ceased to have any will of her own; she lay on the top of the wave conscious of some pain, but chiefly of weakness.

Rachel's tragedy has to do with her death, with her incapability of feeling at ease in social settings, and also with the prospect of marriage. Rachel sees marriage in tragic terms, as she fears it and some critics have interpreted her death as a way to escape marriage.

Readers are encouraged to imagine a poetic space which builds on their previous knowledge of lyric poetry. When Sabrina interacts with another character, Cotyto, she shows him to be uncivilized in expressing his emotions. Rachel perceives Terence's interactions with her in a similar manner. She casts herself in the role of Sabrina, and she casts Terence in the role of Cotyto. The fact that Rachel is troubled by the lines in the poem suggests that this novel will deviate from the traditional marriage plot common in the works of authors such as Jane Austen. Otherwise, the reader might misinterpret the intention of the novel, based on the setting and the characters' interaction, and apply the traditional Romantic grid of interpretation to the plot in *The Voyage Out*. The absence of a happy ending is suggested by the pattern of interaction common to Rachel and Terence, and Sabrina and Cotyto. To this, another established pattern can be added, that of the paradox of associating love and pain in Keats' Romantic poems:

Keats often associated love and pain both in his life and in his poetry. […] Love and death are intertwined in "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil," "Bright Star," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The Fatal Woman (the woman whom it is destructive to love, like Salome, Lilith, and Cleopatra) appears in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "Lamia."[1]

Rachel is portrayed as a tragic heroine for whom love is coupled with death. Her fate is anticipated by this pattern of cultural associations. Love, for Rachel and Terence, is destructive. The space suggested here is that of poetry, and it is more a mood than a physical space. It is a space constructed by readers as poetic by means of their previous associations and knowledge. Another character, Ridley, is also troubled by some lines, from Milton's *Nativity Ode,* which he remembers later like a refrain. Lines of verse have a direct connection with characters' moods which they project on the atmosphere. The choice of a different place contributes to the readers' perception of the plot as deviating from the marriage plot which they otherwise might have expected.

[1] http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/keats.html



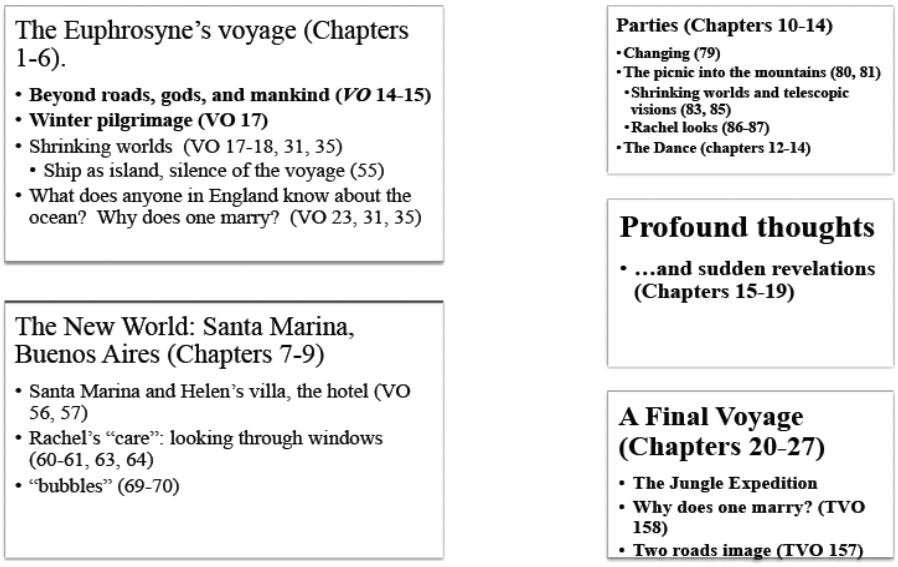
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According to Diane F. Gillespie, in Sally Greene, ed., in *Virginia Woolf: Reading the Renaissance* (1999: 214), *Comus* is an intertextual reference which does everything to move away from the marriage plot. Sabrina drowns herself in order to avoid rape. Rachel gets a mysterious and sudden illness while engaged to Terence so as to avoid the traditional marriage plot but also to avoid sexual violence (Greene 1999: 131). The marriage plot may be called traditional since it "has reigned over female readers from the novel's inception at least until Woolf's time" (Greene 1999: 132).

The reference to the story of Comus and Sabrina is not the only one used by Woolf. Woolf uses plenty of previous existing literature. She uses the concept of moments of vision from Romantic poetry in order to play with a Jane Austen-type marriage plot: questioning and reworking this common trope. The traditional Jane Austen plot is concerned with relationships: marriage and happiness, marriage and unhappiness, and match-making among characters. Woolf, however, guides this traditional formula towards a tragic end. Boring social situations, characters' dilemmas concerning relationships, their concern with their future, and their own experiences are mixed with more reflective moments from Romantic and Renaissance poems, as well as with a touch of tragedy familiar to readers of ancient dramas.

As with more traditional stories, in *The Voyage Out* there is not much distinction between the situation in the main fabula and the situation in the characters' memories. The story is not reconstructed from memories, as it is in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Thompson (2012) sketches the following plot structure for *The Voyage Out*:




This illustrates the way this novel differs in terms of structure from a traditional novel. One can notice the importance of various reflections, which coexist with more traditional scenes.

In Woolf's novels, *The Voyage Out* included, both traditional and experimental elements work together to create the lyrical novel. Past traditions serve as a background for understanding and expressing the characters' emotional states.

The elegiac, sometimes mournful or nostalgic, at other times nearly tragic aspect of her novels contributes, together with the Romantic tropes, to insight into a definition of the lyrical novel. Woolf shocked her readers with her experimental technique. Yet why did this happen? Are her novels really that different from traditional ones? Woolf shaped readers' perceptions of what she called the traditional novel in her essays. She defined her new type of



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novel in opposition to the traditional novel. Thus, she outlined expectations about previous novels and then challenged them. She focused on the idea that previous novels made use of chronological time and a plot which included lots of incidents. By 'traditional novel', she meant one that contained few if any flashbacks, that had a plot driven by the way incidents happen chronologically, few reflective moments belonging to the characters, and an omniscient narrator. She later challenged this type of novel, saying that these sorts of novels reflected little verisimilitude to life.

Critics have traditionally focused on aspects in Woolf's novels such as her focus on inner reality, her use of language, her use of external reality, her use of other texts, her use of traditional elements or her innovations in story-telling. All aspects play a role, yet the lyrical aspect is most prominent. Critics have analysed the lyrical novel focusing on various aspects: the poetic aspect, the depiction of the external world, the action of the story, and the relationships among characters. The same aspects retain the attention of readers. Here, narratological theories relating to the difference between fabula and story account for the reader's attention. The term *fabula* is defined as the story with no artistic work done by the writer. The fabula refers to those incidents which occur to the novels' characters, arranged in a logical and chronological way, even if they are not arranged this way in the novel. The fabula is just the "raw material of the story", as Paul Cobley explains. The writer organizes this raw material to suit his artistic purposes. At the level of the fabula, "there are no flashbacks or variations in point of view at this level of analysis." (Onega 1996: 7) These belong to the level of the story. Sometimes the fabula draws our attention, but initially it is the story that attracts us. Woolf wrote her novels at the story level, changing the order in which she presented the incidents, without being bound to the usual chronological order in which events occur. A writer can choose which character tells the story and what character's perspective the readers have access to. The fabula is made up of incidents which have not gone through the work of the writers. Readers are prompted to imagine something else: a poem or a drama which is not actually there. The lyrical novel is not just the work of the writer; it also relies on the work done by the readers. Critics go through a similar process when a certain aspect commands their attention. Sometimes we do not see what is there, but instead what we have been taught to see. As readers, we rely on knowledge of previous texts. The influence of the Romantic poets on Woolf influences our perception of the story, allowing us to see its poetic aspects.

*The Voyage Out* revels in a freedom for the mixture of various literary genres. Woolf uses this mixture to bring the lyrical aspect into the foreground, especially when characters reflect about life. Multiple perspectives on what happens in the novel resonate with the view common in poetry that a character's personality is fragmented, not coherent. The symbolic dimension of characters achieving a coherent vision on life through communication or other experiences again resonates with poetry. Woolf has directly influenced contemporary authors like Graham Swift, who have further advanced Woolf's techniques, such as the use of water (especially the sea) as a symbolic background for the characters' reflections, the moments of vision, the tragic view on everyday life, and the idea that everyday life is not something well-arranged or even coherent.

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