

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Aubrae M. Vanderpool for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, Women's Studies, and English presented on June 15, 2004.

Title: Virginia Woolf and "A Woman's Autobiography:" Rewriting Victorian Conventions of Autobiography

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This thesis brings together gender and genre criticism to consider Virginia Woolf's memoir, "A Sketch of the Past," as a modern experiment in rewriting the traditions and conventions of Victorian autobiography. This thesis will demonstrate how Woolf specifically disrupts the conventions of linear representations of time and the assumed authority of authorship in order to establish her autobiography outside the realm of a tradition which seeks to marginalize the experience of women. Woolf uses language to renegotiate her relationship to autobiographical traditions by exploring different authorial positions and strategies which question the Victorian paradigm such as foregrounding her own compositional process, creating distance between herself as a subject and as a producer of autobiography, and insisting on the ways conventional autobiography ignores the experiences of women. Woolf locates herself outside the traditional temporal framework of autobiography in order to consider what is omitted from autobiography under this arrangement. Finally,

Woolf uses literal and metaphoric representations of mirrors to reveal what lies unseen, unrealized, and unspoken in the telling of women's lives. Under the presupposition that Woolf aims to create a woman's autobiography, and thus must undo the ways a traditional autobiography does not address the lives of women, Woolf proves that autobiography is a genre important to the successful incorporation of women's lives into literary history. Woolf simultaneously creates a precedent for future women writers to open up their exclusion from autobiography and voice a history that has been silenced, misrepresented, and ignored within the traditions of autobiography.

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Virginia Woolf and "A Woman's Autobiography:" Rewriting Victorian  
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by  
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# Virginia Woolf and "A Woman's Autobiography:" Rewriting Victorian Conventions of Autobiography

## Introduction

### i. Why "I": why Woolf?

The complexity behind the moment one says, "I" is often overlooked. It is uttered countless times a day, in multiple contexts, and for varying purposes, but whenever the moment--"I" means much more than personal reference. "I" locates us in history, culture, and relationships. It is for this reason that autobiography is a genre possessing more significance than a related personal history. Autobiography is the formal, public moment of saying "I," and answering what constitutes selfhood. Questions of selfhood, however, are much more nuanced within autobiography, for the published autobiography not only says "I," but it says "I" has public relevance. In this way, autobiography is not only the story of the self, but a manifestation of cultural ideology that dictates how and what that story will be.

Historically, the concept of selfhood and the public moment of saying "I" has been a masculine domain. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography*, record the patriarchal terrain of autobiography supporting this assertion with the basic premise of a generalized definition of autobiography that seeks to exclude particular types of subjects. Specifically, they cite the traditional definition of autobiography as "the story of one's life written by himself" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 1). Under this assumption, a masculine



notion of selfhood is posited as universal. Of course, this is not to say that women have never claimed the "I" within the autobiographical genre, but this is to insist that the feminine "I" announces an entirely different rhetorical moment, not accounted for in traditional definitions of autobiography. The female "I," as authorized by the autobiographical genre, is always already outside the parameters of traditional autobiographical convention and inherently a transgressive gesture unto itself.

Virginia Woolf, most known as a fiction writer, had a lifelong interest in life-writing<sup>1</sup>, both from a personal and theoretical perspective. The way women must negotiate a location for themselves in a genre that ideologically excludes them is central to her interest in the genre. In this way, Woolf, a modernist writer, anticipates the work of later critiques of feminist literary theory. Within Woolf's life-writing, she consistently struggles with the location of her "I" and the psychological and social forces which deny her this access. Interestingly though, for all of Woolf's transgressive desires for women's life-writing, she never published her own attempts at autobiography<sup>2</sup>. Four months after finishing the most extensive draft of her memoir<sup>3</sup>, "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf committed

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<sup>1</sup> "Life-writing" is an inclusive term used by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* to refer to "writing of diverse kinds that takes life as its subject" (3). This writing can be "biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer" (Smith and Watson *Reading Autobiography* 3). For my purposes, I will use the term life-writing to refer broadly to Woolf's self-writing in the form of diaries, letters, essays, and memoirs.

<sup>2</sup> Autobiography is a term referring to the particular form of writing which takes the self as its subject and refers to the time period in which this type of writing emerged, the Enlightenment (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 3). Autobiography is also a privileged term for a type of life-writing which "celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 3).

<sup>3</sup> While "A Sketch of the Past" is technically a memoir, I will use this term and autobiography

suicide. Thirty-five years after her death, in 1976, her numerous attempts at life-writing were collected, edited, published, and titled, *Moments of Being* by Jeanne Shulkind. The collection includes five different autobiographical composition. Three of the pieces were “papers delivered between 1920 and 1936 to the Memoir Club, a group of close friends of long standing who gathered at intervals to read memoirs in which they were committed to complete candour” (Shulkind ii). The earliest autobiographical work collected in *Moments of Being*, begun in 1907, is titled, “Reminiscences.” It is addressed to Woolf’s nephew, Julian, and concerns the life of her sister and Julian’s mother, Vanessa Bell. “Reminiscences,” however, details the shared childhood and adolescence of the Stephen children. The longest and most personally revealing of the selections in *Moments of Being* is “A Sketch of the Past,” begun in 1939, and last dated on November 17, 1940.

The text of “A Sketch of the Past,” as published in *Moments of Being*, is based on two separate typescripts. The first, housed at the University of Sussex Library, consists of seventy pages typed by Virginia Woolf with corrections made in pencil and ink by Virginia and Leonard Woolf. As Jeanne Schulkind records in her editor’s note, “It was Virginia Woolf’s practice to submit her work to her husband, Leonard, for revision...” (9). The second manuscript is a seventy-seven page typescript, considered a substantial revision of the first, but also includes twenty-seven pages of new material, without a known manuscript version (Schulkind 62). Currently, this manuscript rests in the British Library.

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interchangeably to refer to this work because Woolf is specifically referring to the construction of

Of Woolf's many autobiographical attempts, "A Sketch of the Past" was Woolf's most complete. She was nearly sixty when she began its composition in 1939 and saw it as a relief to her writing of Roger Fry's biography, a project she was working on concurrently with great anguish (Rose 222). Woolf's later memoir, "A Sketch of the Past," includes much of the same content as "Reminiscences," the childhood years of the Stephen children, but as its composition occurred near the end of Woolf's life, it is a far different text, as Woolf was a far different subject. During the writing of "Reminiscences," Woolf had yet to publish her first novel, but by the time she was writing "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf had published all of her works except *Between the Acts* and the diaries, essays and her collection of memoirs that were published posthumously (Hussey xii). By 1940, when Woolf stopped work on "A Sketch of the Past," her face had already appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and Woolf was looking back at her life during a time of war (Silver 79).

The question must be asked, however, why, in a study of women's autobiography, does one choose an author whose autobiography was not only unfinished, but never published in her lifetime? In other words, why Virginia Woolf? Woolf is a valuable subject for this study because she combines theoretical and practical approaches to women's autobiography. That is, Woolf had a fundamental understanding of women's exclusion from the genre and a desire to produce an alternative text, both in terms of writing her own life and

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autobiography as she composes "A Sketch of the Past." That is, her concern is specifically the

creating a precedent for other women to locate their “I.” Woolf wanted to not only claim women’s absence in the genre, but actualize their presence. In Woolf’s desire to create something new--a woman’s autobiography-- Woolf’s “I” becomes larger than individual reference. It is a collective “I” that serves to announce women’s presence in a genre where identity connotes a socially relevant life.

In many ways, because “A Sketch of the Past” was published after Woolf’s death, readers are privy to a rarely visited rhetorical world. It is a place where one can visit the moment of composition, a more uninhibited place to locate Woolf, the writer. Certainly, its posthumous publication causes one to ask more questions than are easily answered as to Woolf’s intentionality within the draft, but one could also consider these questions as provocative sites of inquiry as well. For example, what is signified in Woolf’s deliberate decision not to live to see her “I” made public? How is this complicated in knowing that Woolf was already a famous name and face in the world when she died?

In many ways, Woolf’s “I” was already public, but the “I” in “A Sketch of the Past” is a severe departure from her public persona, evident in the fact that *she* would have been the author of its public entrance. In Woolf’s suicide, she rejected her own presence in the moment she would say “I” in autobiography. In this way, Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” provides us with an “I” that never existed in the conventional way within the autobiographical tradition, and in many ways, this was just what Woolf intended.

## ii. Autobiography: theoretical overview

The roots of autobiography can be seen as “extending back to, and perhaps before, the Greeks and Romans in antiquity and extending beyond Western culture” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 83). For the purposes of this project, as well as for the majority of literary criticism that exists for autobiography, the tradition is one that is concentrated primarily as a Western pursuit, and “at a moment of individuation in the wake of the Enlightenment” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 84), and thus the scope of criticism rests primarily within these historical and cultural parameters. Early notions of autobiography during the nineteenth century, as theorized primarily by German philologist, Georg Misch, in his 1907 book, regarded the autobiography as “the representative lives of the leaders who participated in this achievement of civilization...” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 113). In essence, early understandings of autobiography concerned the achievements of “the great man.” Autobiography, then, is regarded not only as a patriarchal domain, but also in other explicitly masculine definitions. For instance, the topic of autobiographies concerns public life and pursuits, and autobiographical identities are limited to such prescriptive roles as the “hero...the ‘great-minded man,’...the ideal monk, the ideal knight, the ideal gentleman, the ideal teacher, and so on” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 127). Within this framework, a female autobiographer is positioned as an “other” even before her writing begins. Shari

Benstock, a feminist critic of autobiography, states, “our [women’s] experience of its social and political effects comes under the terms of another law- that of gender” (Benstock 16). The position of “other” invokes an inherent division between the subject and the self within an autobiography. As such, women have a much more complicated task as they strive to construct an autobiographical identity in a patriarchal culture and literary tradition. This exclusion leaves women invisible altogether in the story of selfhood.

Various social phenomena, such as modernism and Freudian psychoanalysis, contributed to new understandings of autobiography known as “second-wave approaches” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 122). Within this framework, autobiography came to possess a more liberally minded definition about the human experience. The overwhelming idea about selfhood was not what one did (one’s public deeds); rather, autobiography came to render identity a present creation. That is, “life narrative was seen as a process through which a narrator struggles to shape an identity out of an amorphous experience of subjectivity” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 125). A primary work marking this shift in the consciousness of the “I” to a more process oriented inquiry, is James Olney’s 1972 book, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Attributing this shift to Georges Gusdorf’s 1956 essay, “Conditions and Limitation of Autobiography,” Olney argues autobiographical subjectivity becomes less about one’s public performance, and more of a blending of conscious and subconscious experience, a creative process rather than a

transcription of the past (Olney 9-11). Nonetheless, this framework still possessed a unified concept of the self in its assumption that discontinuous experience would eventually come together to reveal something essential about selfhood

This is not to say, however, that the fragmentation of selfhood was not present. Clearly, a concept of a discontinuous self existed, as put forth by Freud's psychoanalytic theory, but the overwhelming idea still existed that the aim of the autobiography was to convey an "isolate individual" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 126). This tendency is also noted by Shari Benstock in her essay, "Authorizing the Autobiographical," where she argues, "The whole thrust of such works is to seal up and cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities hesitations, and blind spots" (20). In this way, patriarchal influence in second-wave criticism can still be seen through the governing ideology both of autobiography and its criticism. There is an expectation within this paradigm that one is to master the self. Through telling one's story, the autobiographer is able to exert power and control over his/her own subjectivity, and in such, present a fully realized and reconciled understanding of the self. There is a demand of authority within this construction, which asserts that to be an autobiographer one authorizes the subject. Thus, to have a complete concept of self, as defined through the autobiographical genre, the "I" must be unified, the "I" must be authorial, and subsequently, the "I" must be male. From a feminist critical perspective, this construction is problematic because it places women's ability to authorize their identities at odds with culture. As Shari Benstock rightly notes, "the very

requirements of the genre are put into questions by the limits of gender” (20).

In most recent autobiographical criticism, marginalized identities are a focal point, as deconstruction seeks to unravel the hierarchies which posit ‘otherness’ (Murpin and Ray 76). In such hierarchies, the issue of gender within autobiography is of particular importance. Deconstruction has enabled a reconceptualization of “self-presence, authority, authenticity, and truth” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 132). But more is at stake here than a mere decoding of one’s life as represented (or not) in a power-infused tradition. More specifically, deconstruction asks, what is the psychological, social, and cultural moment of the writing itself, and similarly, what theoretical and ideological premise is this information received from? This perspective informs my reading of Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past,” as I examine not only conceptions of the self, but also those of the self who writes.

### iii. What lies ahead

The first chapter of this project, “Strategies of Resistance,” will examine the historical, personal, and cultural traditions Woolf inherits as she begins to consider, “what *is* a woman’s autobiography?” Through these lenses, Woolf begins to interrupt particular conventions of Victorian autobiography which function to construct the exclusionary forces of autobiography itself. Specifically, Woolf examines the conventions of authorship and linear time to discover discursive ways of opening up these conventions, and subsequently the autobiographical genre as well.



“Reframing the Mirror” is a reading of the literal and metaphoric presences of the mirror within “A Sketch of the Past.” The mirror figures prominently in Woolf’s literal memory as a way of characterizing the influences of Victorian, upper-class, feminine identity construction. This is based on her own literal image within mirrors, her objectification through the presence of metaphorical social mirrors, and in the way conventional autobiography has been envisioned in terms of reflection. Woolf’s strategy is to interrupt the traditional representations of mirrors and the act of looking in order to disrupt power arrangements and allow her to authorize her own subjectivity. This authorization speaks to larger aims as Woolf is simultaneously manifesting the autobiography she claims has been missing from the genre all along-- “a woman’s autobiography.”

## Strategies of Resistance: Victorian Autobiography and Woolf's Response

### i. Establishing gender difference within traditions of autobiography

The word "autobiography" came into the English language in the 1790's, and as Martin Danahay argues in his book, *A Community of One: Masculine Autobiography and Autonomy in Nineteenth Century Britain*, the "history of autobiography...is bound up with the history of individualism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (11). Danahay continues, "the genre that came to be called 'autobiography' in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century depends upon a set of assumptions that are coterminous with the ideas of individualism" (11). Therefore, in defining autobiography we must recognize the inheritance of its own history and conventions that evolved through the Victorian period and into Woolf's era. In this way, individuality, masculinity, and selfhood come together to constitute the conceptions of autobiography as a literary genre.

Virginia Woolf, an avid reader of autobiographies and a discerning observer of literary tradition, brought a particular awareness and criticism of the genre and its cultural assumptions to her autobiographical pursuit. Woolf's criticism of the genre is a launching point to the composition of her 1940 memoir, "A Sketch of the Past." In fact, Woolf's criticism of autobiography directly challenges its conception as an individual and masculine pursuit. Implicitly asking through her own autobiographical composition, "What if the 'individual' subject is a woman?" This type of gender inquiry is demonstrated in a letter Woolf wrote to

her friend, Ethel Smyth, a contemporary composer, feminist, suffragette and writer (Hussey 259). In Woolf's letter to Smyth, she replies to Smyth's decision to begin writing her own autobiography. Woolf writes, "I was thinking the other night that there's never been a woman's autobiography" (*Letters* 453). Woolf cites female expectations of "chastity and modesty" as the obstacles which have prevented women from "tell[ing] the truths about [themselves]" (*Letters* 453). According to Woolf's observations, the tradition of autobiography has fundamentally excluded the truthful lives of women in its insistence on a particular type of autobiographical identity. Within Woolf's statement concerning the absence of a woman's autobiography, she not only makes a perceptive observation about the literary tradition of autobiographies, implying a difference between a woman's autobiography and a man's, but she also poses a challenge to herself to define that difference in language. If there is not a woman's autobiography, and if we take "A Sketch of the Past" as an attempt to write what might have been missing in the tradition that proceeds her, her remark suggests there is more at stake within her own composition than an individual, artistic effort. Thus, Woolf's experiment in autobiography looks two ways. In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf is looking back to the conventions that frame her autobiographical project, but also casting her vision forward, writing a precedent for the future and setting the standards for what a woman's autobiography might become, and how the self within that autobiography--a different subject--could be written.

Unlike Woolf's other autobiographical attempts, "A Sketch of the Past"

comes later in her career, recalling the events of her girlhood, as remembered by an older self. This later memoir evokes autobiographical convention in several ways. Woolf enacts a recollection of the people, places, and events we might find in any life of singular importance. She establishes a recognizable chronology of these events, noting her own development from a young child who remembers what it was like to have buried her nose in her mother's dress, to later, more public moments of societal initiation and humiliation in the drawing rooms of her Edwardian adolescence. In recalling these moments, she emphasizes the power of memory and reflection.

We can contextualize the arrangement of life events in Woolf's memoir by noting what it provides us with is a series of initiations, events that determine her coming-of-age as a woman. The events foregrounded in this memoir include her earliest memories of her mother, her molestation by her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, and finally, her formal introduction into Victorian society. References to place within her memoir include several homes and provide important contexts in which to interpret her life crises and development of female identity. The summer residence at St. Ives, Cornwall, is where the Stephen family spent their holidays, and their London home, 22 Hyde Park Gate, is portrayed as a much more closed-in and crowded space of Victorian furnishings and portraits. Woolf juxtaposes her experiences in these two very different places, depicting the home at St. Ives on the Cornwall coast as a portrait of idyllic country life and intensely sensual memories associated with her early childhood. Conversely, 22 Hyde Park

Gate, also known as the Talland House, proves the place of tragic and cruel events, where Woolf's mother and eldest sister, Stella, die, where Woolf is molested by her half-brother, George Duckworth, and where Woolf must endure the emotional abuse of her father and the stifling influence of Victorian culture upon her very being (Bell 42, 57, 43; Rose 13,18,118).

Like autobiographers before her, Woolf draws upon precedents by emphasizing the power of memory and reflection in rendering past events meaningful in the present. As a modernist, her autobiographical writing departs from the Victorian traditions of representing the writer's memories as an objective and factual mirror of the chronological past. Instead, Woolf upsets the assumption of linear time and vests her authority in the idea of a life composed not of accumulated facts but of remembered "impressions" (67). The "impression" allows Woolf a more open construction in which to explore the form and content of autobiography itself. In the introduction to "A Sketch of the Past," Jeanne Schulkind, the scholar who has edited several editions of Woolf's memoirs, calls attention to the openness of the "impression" where the "present moment" serves to recollect past events and to treat these events as complex and multi-layered. Schulkind writes, "The present moment - 1939-1940- is the platform of which she [Woolf] stands to explore the meaning behind certain indelibly printed experiences of her childhood and the figures who dominated that world" (61). Standing on that platform, throughout "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf uses the word "impression" frequently, highlighting its relation to her composing self and in characterizing her

text. Using “impressions,” Woolf gets at the power of memory as a creative and generative force. She uses the “present” and the concept of the “impression” to actualize her sense that memory shapes--and does not merely reflect-- subjectivity. These impressions also serve to underscore the dialectics of memory. They occur negatively in Woolf’s text as well, as the influence of forgetting particular memories becomes a fundamental point of Woolf’s in noting what is traditionally omitted from autobiography. The “negative impression” bears cultural significance for Woolf, for what has *not* been written or acknowledged in autobiography is what Woolf evokes in her criticism of the genre. An impression then, is formed by influence, whether of things present or absent, or only partially present, and manifested through the autobiographer’s commitment to the power of memory.

## ii. Contributions of feminist genre criticism

Woolf’s 1940 observation that there has never been a woman’s autobiography uncannily anticipates the emphasis on connections between gender and genre in feminist literary theory. Beginning in the 1960’s and 70’s, feminist criticism has drawn on women’s social movements to suggest the possibility of alternatives to the story of the “accomplished male” (Jelenik 13). In fact, autobiography was one of the first literary genres to be explored from a feminist critical perspective. Feminism and feminist literary criticism has had an interest in analyzing autobiography for the way that subjectivity is figured in thoroughly masculine terms, effectively excluding differently constructed and located

subjectivities. Feminist criticism of autobiography has also become a site and strategy for women's empowerment through the voicing of their lives. In order to become empowering and empowered, however, the moment of saying "I" for the female autobiographer must also engage in the struggle to renegotiate authority more on her own terms. Rita Felski notes how a "female subjectivity" entails the problem of acquiring a 'representative status' in order to be liberating" (Smith and Watson, *Getting a Life* 250). That is, while feminism (as a social movement) can be used as a lens to critique autobiography's gendered practices, autobiography itself can be used by feminism to foster strategies of deconstruction and empowerment. As Sidonie Smith writes in *Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, "women engage autobiographical discourse to renegotiate their cultural marginality and enter into literary history" (141). Feminist criticism contributes to autobiographical studies by asking whether there might not be many ways to write a life and many women's lives worth writing. Both as a critical lens and a strategy of deconstruction, feminist genre criticism shall be the methodology employed through this examination of Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past."

As Annette Kolodony has argued, recent feminist criticism is a methodology that borrows from both structuralist and post-structuralist approaches (18-19). Thus, feminist criticism explores not only the power inequalities that structure the expressions of individual voices, but the institutional determinants that characterize which autobiographical discourses can be spoken, by whom, and how they circulate in language and society (Kolodny 24). Feminist inspired

studies of masculinity in autobiography, such as Danahay's, presuppose that masculine discourses of autobiography can be located in the Victorian traditions which Woolf "inherits," both through masculine influence within the family (her father was a famous author of autobiography) and discursive traditions.

In discourses, as in women's lives, gendered power relations are asymmetrical. Michael Sprinker, drawing upon Foucault's notion of the "author function," suggests that the very question of authorship, of which gender can write autobiography, is lodged in historical shifts in the circulation of autobiographical genres. Before the eighteenth century, Sprinker suggests, the autobiographical subject was more diffuse, encompassing a variety of life-writing genres. He writes:

Prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, works that are today labeled as autobiography were known as confessions, memoirs, *journaux intime*; the emergence of the word *autobiography* is connected to the emergence of the concept of the author as sovereign subject over a discourse (Danahay 12).

After the eighteenth century, Danahay argues, autobiography becomes more closely identified with the institution of literary authorship. After the eighteenth century, the earlier, residual forms of self-writing did not earn the term autobiography and subsequently, did not possess the authority granted by such a categorization because of the type of subject and author signified by those forms. By Woolf's era, the earlier forms of writing-- "confessions, memoirs, and *journaux intime*," were regarded as outside the parameters of what the "autobiographical subject" implied. These more flexible, varied, multi-autobiographical forms were feminized. Thus, under this framework, to write a



legitimate autobiography, Woolf would have been implicated in writing a particular type of self, which is figured in masculine terms.

In addition to suggesting linkages between any retelling of an individual life and the discourses of autobiography, feminist criticism would urge us to look close to home, to the structures of inequality within the nineteenth and twentieth century family itself. For Woolf, conventions of female exclusion in language stretch beyond the abstractions of the canon and history of autobiography and into her immediate familial tradition. As a member of the Stephen family, Woolf was heir to a legacy of several generations of memoirs published by formidable male ancestors. Autobiography was, in fact, a rich masculine tradition in her family, one “which begins in the early nineteenth century with the remarkable *Memoirs* of Woolf’s great-grandfather, James Stephen,...and includes no fewer than nine full-scale works by members of four successive generations of the Stephen’s family” (Dahl 176). The patriarchal influence of autobiography existed within the very conceptions of family, her daily reality, and undoubtedly, the psyche.

The extent to which patriarchal ideology informs women’s autobiographies is a crucial point to understand, but Woolf goes beyond gender criticism and creates an alternative to the discursive patriarchal space of autobiography within “A Sketch of the Past.” The connection between genre, authorship, and gender allows us to fully grasp the magnitude of patriarchal influence over the genre, and Woolf goes further with these connections in order to illustrate the problematic practices for a female autobiographer, as well as the strategies one might employ

to interrupt this patriarchal script. This thesis argues that Woolf succeeds in interrupting the conventional autobiographical script by foregrounding the process of writing a transgressive text. From Woolf's narrative content to her writerly awareness of the work itself, Woolf is simultaneously constructing and dismantling what we know about patriarchal autobiographical practices in the Victorian middle-and-upper classes of white men.

### iii. Negotiating authorship

Renegotiating authority does not come without a struggle. While masculine authority fostered Woolf's exclusion from autobiography, the problem for Woolf is how to relocate and reframe herself in relation to the genre. In order to do so, she also needs to perform and enact a form of authorship that must be invented, since it is not culturally established. It is this paradoxical relationship to authority that Woolf explores as she attempts to refigure an autobiographical consciousness that rejects precedent while simultaneously enacting a viable alternative. As Woolf is rejecting particular autobiographical conventions, what is at stake in her work is authority itself. That is, if Woolf disrupts authority she must be able to locate her authority elsewhere in order to effect that very disruption.

Beginning within the first few sentences of "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf foregrounds the process of writing by considering her role as a writer of autobiography before she considers herself as the subject of her memoir. In fact, she begins her memoir by telling the story of being dragged into writing, and

assumes the persona of a reluctant autobiographer. Woolf's reluctance is an indirect form of refusing the traditional, masculinist, and declarative entry into autobiographical self-representation--the strong, central "I." In contrast, the first sentences of "A Sketch of the Past," portray a shy autobiographer, deferring the declarative moment of the "I" to another authorizing force, in this case, her sister, Vanessa Bell. Woolf's memoir begins, "Two days ago- Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> April 1939 to be precise- Nessa said that if I did not start writing my memoirs I should soon be too old" (64). Here Woolf emphasizes her decision to enact the memoir she was always writing, implying her command over the genre itself, but simultaneously setting herself apart from autobiographers who do not need an excuse to write because their importance is self-evident. In this, Woolf figures herself as a different kind of subject, located on the margins of Victorian convention.

Throughout "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf foregrounds her role as an autobiographer, thus emphasizing the process of autobiographical composition. This is not a stable role for Woolf, as she insists on illustrating her own fallability within it. She consistently questions her memories, her language, and even the theoretical basis behind her autobiography. For example, after writing her "first memory," Woolf critiques her composition, writing, "I could spend hours trying to write that [her first memory] as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me" (65). In this, Woolf reveals an "anxiety of authorship"<sup>4</sup> with the intense focus surrounding the "rightness" of her

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase, "anxiety of authorship," first termed by Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*

autobiographical production. Woolf distinguishes that her question does not concern *what* she should write, (for she begins unquestionably with her first memory) but rather *how* she should go about it. Methodology is the concern for Woolf, and thus her question of authorizing autobiography is bound up with style, craft, and overall, ideology. As Woolf displays through her desire to produce the first memory “correctly,” her goal for memory is to illustrate the presence of the past--to render the feeling of then, now. Woolf’s authority making in this regard involves bridging the influences of the past with the circumstances of the present. For both within her autobiography and as a critic of autobiography, Woolf is negotiating her way between inheritance and a desire to construct something new--thus, exploring authority’s past, and simultaneously enacting its future.

Woolf’s new-found space between Victorian conventions and her own desire to undo them, introduces fluctuations of subjectivity represented in her stylistic experimentations within her memoir. Initially, as Woolf foregrounds her role as “autobiographer” rather than “autobiographical subject,” she also considers what other manipulations within this role can function to dismantle the authority of the Victorian precedent. As Woolf opens up a critical space for this within her memoir, her manipulation of pronouns function to reveal the fictitious self at the

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argues that “the artist’s ... fear [is] that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings” (Gilbert and Gubar 46). Gilbert and Gubar expand Bloom’s definition to consider this effect on women writers who confront the compounding influence of a patriarchal literary tradition and culture. They argue, “the anxiety of influence that a male experiences is felt by a female as an even more primary ‘anxiety of authorship’--a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate and destroy her” (48-49). For my purposes, the “anxiety of authorship” refers to the compounded effect gender and authorship expectations have for women writers.

center of Victorian autobiographical constructions. Woolf disrupts the association of the first person singular as she foregrounds the distance between the subject and its author through the use of the third person pronoun. As Woolf commences the more traditional component of her autobiography, the recollection of the past, Woolf herself states that she would have more luck in conveying this first memory more accurately if she “had begun by describing Virginia herself” (65). Ironically, in a moment when Woolf proclaims she will give her reader the truest sense of herself, she simultaneously creates the greatest grammatical distance as the subject of the autobiography by referring to herself in the third person. Although there is an implicit distance in this move, Woolf is also calling attention to the discrepancy that exists between the writer and her subject in the autobiographical genre. In her vision, there is more than one voice, persona, and set of possibilities for the subject. Woolf’s practice serves in contrast to the Victorian tradition where “the title of the text and the name of the author are assumed to be absolutely equivalent” (Danahay 13). The convention insists the “I” is a consistent “me.”

Throughout her narrative, Woolf is concerned with the process of how autobiography comes to the page and with the interpretation of that process. In fact, Woolf spends as much time speaking about autobiography as she does chronicling her life. This practice sits in stark contrast to what we assume to be the conventional impetus behind autobiographies, that is, the author’s story and a particular promise of selfhood. As Woolf creates a space for a more fluid concept of identity, she thematizes this fluidity in relation to time and memory by

introducing the figure of “invisible presences” (80). Woolf notes, “...if we cannot analyze these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir, and again how futile life-writing becomes” (80). Woolf’s first use of the unusual term, “invisible presences” comes in reference to memories of her mother, but its meaning extends to an idea of the presence of haunting selves as well. This is not to imply an association of evil, rather Woolf sees these “presences” as inspiring. “Invisible presences” refer to the “other” selves that elude a fixed notion of subjectivity. Woolf’s suggestion through ‘invisible presences’ is that we can know more about the subject of the autobiography by naming what she did not do and where she was not present. More explicitly, “invisible presences” call attention to the kind of social forgetting that figures so prominently in women’s autobiographies. This type of social forgetting is seen most overtly as Woolf concludes her most disturbing and violent memory of her autobiography--the molestation by her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth. (This integral scene in “A Sketch of the Past” will be discussed in “Reframing the Mirror.”) After relating her memory of molestation, Woolf writes, “But of course as an account of my life they are misleading because the things one does not remember are as important, perhaps they are more important” (69). Here, Woolf makes authority through implying absence, picking up on the notion that events or accomplishments mean nothing unless we know of the unnamed psychological and social forces that structure their existence. For this reason, subjectivity must remain open in order to acknowledge what exists outside the historical construction of autobiography.

Insisting on the futility of the genre, as defined in masculinist terms, helps Woolf write beyond it, and her 'invisible presences' structure the possibility of this deviation.

### iii. Genealogical knowledge: rooting and uprooting

Feminist criticism has established that genealogical narratives and locations have long been troubling to women writers. The etymological meaning of authority links the term "to author," as Gilbert and Gubar point out, "to father and possess" (4). References to family origins typically position the autobiographer in reference to patriarchal lineage, reaching back to establish authority from his/her author. Part of Woolf's manifestations of a more fluid concept of subjectivity involves various attempts of 'trying different selves on.' Previously, we see Woolf do this as she foregrounds her role as a writer, but another self she explores in "A Sketch of the Past," is her genealogical identity, the self she inherits as a daughter. This self exists through her personal, historical lineage, which in more conventional autobiographies, provide a means of legitimating narratives of family origins and affiliations. In this light, family proves a definite cultural location for constituting one's authority and for showing how male lineage is constructed in writing. There is an even more specific exploration in Woolf's genealogical references as noted earlier, males in the Stephen's family (that is, those Woolf terms "educated men" in *Three Guineas*) produced a substantial body of autobiographical writing across many generations (Zwerdling 168). Thus, as Woolf investigates her family's literary history and

traditions within the very genre she is working with and against, the question becomes, how does Woolf meet her familial tradition and the transgressive goals of her autobiographical text?

Woolf's premise in entering into the consideration of her genealogical self as a potential location for establishing authority occurs as Woolf considers the reason why "so many [autobiographies] are failures" (65). She claims the reason for the failure is that the autobiography "leave[s] out the person to whom things happened" (65). Therefore, in order to prevent the failure of her own autobiography, she attempts to include "the person," asking, "Who was I then?" (65). In this question, Woolf is clearly not considering "the person" of the present, but rather, employing the past tense, positing that the self whose presence determines one's failure in the genre is located in the past. In Woolf's reply to her own question, she proceeds to introduce the reader, via genealogical references, to 'herself,' writing, "Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsip Stephen, born on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 1882..." (65). In this section, Woolf refers to herself by a name she was never known by, Adeline Virginia Stephen (Benstock 26). This name discrepancy has the effect of creating distance between the multiple selves present in this exact moment in the text--the self who writes, the self that is written, and the self of the past. Compounded with the distance Woolf employs through her past tense construction, Woolf attempts to use a convention which aims at establishing authority only to discover the contradiction it creates within her narrative. This revised genealogical identity



Woolf includes utilizes the construction of something distant and objective, such as genealogical history, to illustrate that this knowledge does not bring her closer to revealing the autobiographical subject at all. In fact, as we can recognize within Woolf's use of language, she is careful to craft her genealogical identity in ways that imply distance rather than intimacy.

It is evident that excavating genealogical tropes as a method of authorizing family history is reminiscent of the Victorian autobiographical tradition in its desire to construct an objective 'truth' constituted through linear progression. Ordinarily, an autobiographer would locate genealogy in a recitation of the pedigree. The key concept of genealogy is the " 'pedigree' of ancestral evidence based on documents and generational history and verified through fixed protocols, such as trees and charts...they can verify an official past...they are interested in objective documentation of relationship" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 195). Feminist critics of autobiography have argued, however, that these objective means are only one way to imagine a life, and that genealogical patterns too often reproduce paternal power (Mohanty 7). Within the confines of Woolf's autobiography, however, she reveals the inadequacy of genealogy as a method of knowing the self. After detailing her lineage, Woolf writes, "...I don't know how much of this, or what part of this, made me feel what I felt in the nursery at St. Ives" (65). For Woolf, subjectivity is rooted in feeling, emotion, sense perception, and memory, none of which can be conveyed through the facts and figures which comprise one's genealogical identity. Woolf notices a

disconnect between a literal notion of one's place in the world and its relation to a feeling at one particular moment. In contrast to the Victorian tradition which regards genealogy as a way to identify oneself exactly and with seamless continuity, Woolf has managed to use her genealogical knowledge to produce an authorial uncertainty. As Woolf practices a revised genealogical subjectivity, she invokes a third person grammar and a name which never constituted the "I" for herself. Although her genealogical history is present to some extent, she evokes it in order to revoke it, redefining the limits of genealogical knowledge within her autobiography.

#### iv. Limits of continuous time

When a writer of a Victorian autobiography commences his/her project, the overwhelming expectation of the genre is its insistence on telling a continuous life story (Danahay 5). Feminist criticisms have argued the problem with a conception of linear time as a way of constituting subjectivity is what it comes to ignore. For instance, if a life is defined chronologically, then it inherently ignores the life that exists simultaneously and in disordered and contradictory ways. Smith and Watson articulate this alternative to linear, objective progress as the "subjective time of memory" (*Reading Autobiography* 126), calling attention to the way memory works associatively. In other words, if chronology narrates objective experience, disrupting this convention is sure to reveal the more organic nature of experience and memory in its disordered, moment-to-moment form. A consideration of representations of time in autobiography has specific relevance

for feminist criticism because of the way the dominant convention of linear time organizes the “autobiographical self” in masculine terms. That is, linear time justifies the Victorian notion of a progressive subjectivity. Therefore, to change representations of time would subsequently change conceptions of autobiographical selfhood.

As Woolf figures herself as a writer of autobiography, as well as an autobiographical subject, she allows herself the freedom to manipulate time, both as one who constructs and experiences selfhood. To a certain extent, Woolf does employ chronological markers--references to specific dates and historical periods--to function as an organizing form for her autobiography. For instance, she begins with “her first memory,” and her autobiography clearly presents Virginia Woolf’s childhood from roughly, 1887-1900. The distinction to be made from Woolf’s practice of chronology, however, is the extent to which linear time progression is used to constitute a cohesive self, and for Woolf, any conception of a unified identity is simply false. As Woolf concludes her presentation of her “first memory” and then her “next memory,” she writes:

But the peculiarity of these two strong memories is that each was very simple. I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation...Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength...But instead of analyzing this, here is an instance of what I mean-my feeling about the looking-glass in the hall (67).

Here Woolf pulls away from the content of past memories to talk about the function of memory itself in her practice of writing. By the end of her commentary, we can see how Woolf, the writer, is interrupted by a particular

“sensation” which proceeds to call up yet another memory. While Woolf may present her memories chronologically, the predominant method Woolf employs is that of associative memory based on emotional connections. While Woolf utilizes chronological ordering towards a pragmatic end, she is careful to disassociate this convention from a means of constituting her subjectivity.

The assumption of conventional autobiographical subjectivity suggests beginnings lie in the past, that an autobiography starts at the beginning of life, or birth, or perhaps even further back, by recognizing the historical origins through the institution of the family--through genealogy (Said 3). In contrast, Woolf emphasizes the subjective function of time and experience within her autobiographical form and content. Woolf does so by designing her own location for autobiography. As Woolf dislocates herself from the conventions and traditions which frame autobiography, she must create some of her own that insist on her presence within the genre. Nonetheless, she possesses doubts about the terrain she is set to explore. We see this as Woolf's event of autobiographical commencement is plagued with the uncertainties and criticisms Woolf still possesses about the genre even as she attempts to rework generic comment. In the first paragraph of “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf writes:

I can remember...the number of different ways in which memoirs can be written, I know many different ways...So without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself- or if not it will not matter- I begin: the first memory (64).

Here, Woolf uses language to actualize the tension between convention and innovation. Woolf knows of the prescriptive forms of autobiography, and

similarly, knows their capabilities within the genre, but Woolf, also recognizes that these procedures are not consistent with her transgressive autobiographical goals. Instead, this haltering and hesitation to commence her autobiographical project has the purpose of undermining more straightforward patriarchal beginnings. To chose a distinct way of presenting one's autobiography implies one has a preconceived notion of where it will end. In other words, if there is a specific way, than it must begin at a distinct place and lead to a distinct end. The logical corollary that functions within a temporal framework is the principle of causation. Woolf, however, refuses to construct a causation for her 'first memory,' and in so doing, rejects the notion that memory functions in chronological and objective ways. Woolf begins with her first memory, not because it is literally first, but because of the emotions it elicits within her serve as an appropriate beginning to her autobiography.

Most important in reworking any precedent, is understanding what was, in order to construct what will be. In her beginnings, Woolf communicates her awareness of the modes of composition involved in writing a traditional autobiography. She recognizes that memoirs can and are written in a variety of ways. The genre is not, processually anyway, homogeneous. The writer chooses a mode and method of self-presentation, but this is not to say that this selection is not culturally codified. As Woolf announces, her method is memory and the "moment" it produces, but her mode involves a simultaneous subversion of traditional autobiographical techniques, dismissing the concept of a progressive

sense of time within autobiography. That is, as Woolf states she will not delay time by constructing an “appropriate” autobiographical sequence, she intentionally chooses “no way” as her way to begin the composition of her autobiography. For Woolf, prescribing the way her autobiographical journey will proceed is irrelevant to the work itself, as she simply states, “it will not matter” (64). Declaratively, Woolf states, “I begin” (64). This serves as her own, self-actualized commencement, a commencement that emphasizes the power of style.

In keeping with the way Woolf figures herself as a writer of autobiography, she consciously addresses the form of her autobiographical undertaking within the narrative of “A Sketch of the Past,” which operates under a new construction of time. Woolf replaces chronological markers with this new unit of time she calls, “moments of being” (84). Woolf’s wondering about the progression and organization of her autobiography comes late relative to a reader’s expectation that this is a consideration that should come before the composition begins or at least within the first few pages. Before Woolf mentions a possible form for her memoir, she has already presented a sequence of memories about St. Ives, certain biographical information about her lineage, her memory of molestation by her half-brother, and her theoretical ordering of memory itself, “moments of being.”

Woolf began “A Sketch of the Past” on April 18, 1939, but she does not consider the organization of her project until May 2<sup>nd</sup>, according to the dated entry she provides. Much like her autobiographical method of approach of ‘no way,’ Woolf refuses to meet the expectation that one must proceed through

autobiography in a prescriptive fashion, and similarly, Woolf refuses to meet the expectation that form comes before content. For Woolf, her form is decidedly the inclusion of the present as she writes, “2<sup>nd</sup> May...I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present...”(75). Woolf’s inclusion of the present functions on two levels. First, it creates a space for her role as an autobiographer, as Woolf can engage in a form of metanarration, actively calling attention to her compositional considerations such as method and form. And second, Woolf denies the assertion that the self is a result of the past by allowing her present subjectivity to be as much a part of her life story as the relation of her past memories. Woolf subverts the notion that an autobiography proceeds in an orderly through the history of one’s life, without considering the influence of the present. Instead of allowing form to be an unspoken assumption, Woolf foregrounds her active consideration of it, thus defining her rhetorical selection as intentional.

Although marking the present with a date signifies the inclusion of the present, there is more to Woolf’s “form” than organizing her autobiography through dated entries. She writes, “It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year’s time” (75). In this, Woolf complicates her distinction between the writer and the subject by invoking a subject that is fragmented by time. Through her form, Woolf gives voice to her notion of a multiple and fluid sense of identity. This functions

through the invocation of two different subjects--Woolf, the autobiographical subject, then and now, and a more obscure third subject, Woolf, as the writer of the autobiography. The presence of three distinct subjectivities exposes the instability of Victorian identity construction as something sovereign, fixed and unchanging. Summarizing the foundational model of autobiography, George Gusdorf writes, "autobiography...requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time" (Benstock 14-15). Although this model considers time a variable influence over the self, it also carries a two-fold assumption about identity. One, that autobiography provides a "true" identity, and second, that this identity is whole, and unified across time. For Shari Benstock, a feminist critic of autobiography, the more realistic possibility for Woolf, is the extent to which "'self' and 'self-image' might not coincide" (15). Woolf clearly recognizes both this negative possibility and power, and maintains a distinct disunity to the notion of a true autobiographical self as demonstrated in her unsettling of linear time.



i. Looking into the mirror

As I have shown within the narrative of "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf is responding to the highly rigid Victorian tradition of autobiographical discourse which frames her life and the composition of her memoirs. Through her text, Woolf demonstrates her knowledge of the cultural devaluation of women not only theoretically, but personally as well. This is most clearly seen in Woolf's descriptions of her family's home, 22 Hyde Park Gate. As the daughter of a Victorian, Leslie Stephen, Woolf writes, "The patriarchal society of the Victorian age was in full swing in our drawing room..." (153). In the same memoir, she further characterizes the Victorian age as "that great patriarchal machine" (153). This is by no means the first reference to patriarchy in Woolf's work--she had recently completed the strongest indictment of the British professional and upper class, educated men in *Three Guineas*. Thus, Woolf finds herself moving between personal and historical forces of Victorianism as she begins writing "A Sketch of the Past." These influences, each defined by their displacement of women--traditions of Victorian society and the traditions of Victorian autobiography--drive the strategies Woolf employs to dismantle the 'great patriarchal machine' and reinstitute an autobiography which meets her transgressive aims. Most problematic for Woolf within her autobiography, is the precedent established through the notion of a cohesive self and the patriarchal authority which constitutes its construction. Feminist critic of autobiography,

Shari Benstock, also acknowledges these conventions of traditional subjectivity embedded in the autobiographical canon, noting:

The confessions of an Augustine or a Rousseau, the *Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson*, or the *Education of Henry Adams*, do not admit the internal cracks and disjuncture, rifts and ruptures. The whole thrust of such works is to seal up and cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations and blind spots (20).

In contrast, Woolf's autobiography rejects the fiction of this cohesion through strategies that deconstruct Victorian notions of linear time and the assumed authority of masculine authorship. If conventional autobiography embodies linearity, cohesion, and authority, Woolf is poised to disrupt this construction, yet also to struggle with the terms of remaking her own authoritative status as a maker of a "woman's autobiography." Through literal and metaphoric presences of the mirror in "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf is able to construct a figuration of authorship that rejects the mirror as the symbol of solitary individualism and the autobiographical pursuit, and instead, redefine traditional conceptions of the mirror as a means of reframing her identity, and more importantly, women's autobiography.

## ii. Facing sexual violence

The literal place of the mirror in "A Sketch of the Past" most noted by critics of Woolf's autobiography, is Woolf's memory of molestation by her half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, as it occurred in the hallway of the family home. This scene is connected to mirrors in two ways, both associatively and literally. First, Woolf recalls this memory at Hyde Park Gate in response to her feelings of

guilt and shame associated with her own reflection in the mirror, and secondly, as her biographers confirm, her molestation occurred in front of this very same mirror which produced these feelings<sup>5</sup> (Hussey 75). As Woolf retells her molestation, she positions herself before the mirror, a vulnerable subject position, and recalls an act of violence that she will insist is historical, not merely personal. Before Woolf announces her memories of molestation, however, she discusses the mirror as a shameful example of female vanity, repositioning the mirror in a social and cultural moment. She writes:

There was a small looking-glass in the hall at Talland House. It had, I remember, a ledge with a brush on it. By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it (68).

Within this passage, Woolf notes several facets of the legacy of mirrors in the lives of women as constituted through the act of looking. Laura Mulvey's feminist approach to the act of looking in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" argues for a link between dominance and the gaze. Mulvey writes:

In a world of sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong, visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (589).

As a woman, to be looked at, whether through one's own eyes or by another's, is

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<sup>5</sup> Woolf's incest has been differently characterized by her biographers. For instance, Quentin Bell calls it a "nasty erotic skirmish," (43) and Joanne Trautmann Banks says Woolf was "sexually caressed" (Hussey 75). Phyllis Rose has also suggested that Woolf lied about the incest she suffered (Hussey 75). Most recent studies of Woolf acknowledge her as a victim of incest.

to be positioned within the symbolic social order of gender, because the act of looking is part of cultural reproduction. Specifically applied to Woolf, she recognizes her feelings of guilt and shame are a by-product of her self-image, and perhaps more metaphorically, as bodily awareness coincides with self-consciousness. As Mulvey asserts, this self-consciousness is also the product of patriarchal ideology, revealing that the mirror is in fact a social space as well. That is, as one looks into the mirror, one is reflecting the space that exists between the self (the looker) and the other (the mirror-image).

When Woolf she sees her image represented in the mirror in this more complex way, the patriarchal narrative of her childhood emerges. She notes her shame and further marks this feeling as inherent. While dominant culture and constructions of looking leave her “naturally” shamed by her own self-image, Woolf recognizes that in order to reframe her identity she must seek an authority outside cultural constructions which leave women shamed by their own self-image. In this way, the problem of reflecting on the self through cultural looking-glasses functions to reveal a significance beyond Woolf’s individual experience where shame becomes the value connected to the collective image of women in the mirror.

Uncannily anticipating later feminist critiques of the value society attaches to a woman’s image of seeing and being seen, Woolf illustrates the way the mirror reproduces patriarchal constructions of gender (Mulvey 585). Literally, as Woolf looks back on the memory of her image in the mirror, she is perplexed by her

reactions to it, and thus attempts to articulate her negative relationship to mirrors. Part of her method includes marking the point at which she interrupts the image desired from her in the Victorian mirror. Instead of the expected reflection in the mirror as a means of framing feminine identities, Woolf disrupts this stream of thought to introduce a contradictory image of gender that does not fit the social theme. She writes:

Vanessa [Woolf's sister] and I were both what was called tomboys; that is, we played cricket, scrambled over the rocks, climbed trees, were said not to care for clothes and so on. Perhaps therefore to have been found looking in the glass would have been against our tomboy code (68).

Noting the difference between appropriate behavior for boys and girls, Woolf connects the mirror to conceptions of femininity. Her tone is playfully resistant, noting her loyalty to a rebellious, childhood persona. Even so, Woolf senses there is more to her relationship with the mirror than feelings of guilt over a disconnected self-image. She writes, "But I think my feelings of shame went a great deal deeper" (68). Woolf acknowledges the complexity involved in her shameful feelings regarding patriarchal constructions of femininity, and recognizes they are much larger than individual perception, instead reaching "deeper" into the social background of the mirror itself. While the presence of a mirror-image makes a physical selfhood tangible, the presence of one's image is a doubly codified experience for women, as the image is also embedded in the context of the mirrored moment. In other words, the mirror offers a double-take--first the image, then its background. The limitation and trap of the mirror construction is that it assumes a superficial portraiture. In other words, the focus is on one's

reflection, and often, to the detriment of women, the reflection in the background of the mirror goes unnoticed, unexamined, and most importantly, unspoken.

Most notable in considering a collective history of women's unspoken past is the presence of sexual violence. From the point Woolf first mentions the "looking-glass" and her feelings of guilt and shame associated with it, to her conclusion of the "molestation-scene," (69) Woolf writes through stream-of-consciousness, without paragraph breaks or gaps in the text, not questioning her associations, but trusting them to carry her narrative. As Woolf recalls the experience of molestation, she writes, "Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this [slab], and as I sat there he began to explore my body" (69). The traditional story-like element of this construction, "Once when..." has the effect of providing Woolf with a different, more historical voice within her text, opening up a previously silenced history. Her seemingly objective tone does shift, however, as the emotions of the memory interrupts its telling, and Woolf is catapulted back to re-imagining her molestation all over again.

The interrupted narrative focuses on Woolf's feelings during the moment of violation. Woolf writes:

I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop. His hand explored my private parts too. I remember resenting, disliking it- what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling? It must have been strong, since I still recall it (69).

The way sexual violation comes to figure itself in Woolf's previous association of guilt and shame with her physical presence in a mirror is quite evident from a

theoretical standpoint, but the narrative hesitates over this fact. Woolf struggles to arrive at this connection, but it evades her. She states, "I've only been able to discover some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I have got at the truth; yet this is a simple incident; and it happened to me personally; and I have no motive for lying about it" (69). As Woolf presents this memory she struggles with her own authority to have it, let alone tell it. She anticipates objections, and thus supplies a series of justifications for her voicing of this memory. What is crucial to recognize is that Woolf is transgressive simply by telling her story, authorized by her own voice, in a moment that demands her silence. In this way, Woolf exposes a new narrative outside of the conventional association of the mirrored gaze, which allows her to create her own experience through language rather than be a victim to a patriarchal language structure which denies Woolf's reality.

Woolf is not comfortable letting her memories of mirrors rest, however, with overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame. Instead, we see Woolf struggle for the 'truth' of her self-image. As Woolf says in reference to her mirror-image, "I do not suppose I have got at the truth," (69) She recognizes that the guilt and shame she has come to cast upon herself is a fiction, not the "natural" perception she once thought. While Woolf struggles with her own authority to tell this memory of molestation, and further, to create belief in the way she tells it, she nonetheless recognizes that it is the construct of the mirror itself that has reproduced the fictions of the past because the gaze is premised on a notion of

dominance. Her truth and her authority to tell it, while ignored when women see themselves only in the looking-glass provided by men, is the reflection Woolf struggles to tell as it lies hidden in the shadows of the background.

What Woolf comes to realize in writing about her own molestation and her mirror-image is how patriarchal culture has figured their construction. In other words, molestation and self-image are seen through gendered lenses. Woolf deconstructs the notion that her experiences are not merely personal by voicing a history for women that is larger than her own story. Another shift in voice occurs at the point where Woolf takes herself beyond the moment of violation in her memoir, and instead shifts to a narrative voice more concerned with creating a collective history for women. After relating her memory of molestation, Woolf writes:

This [Woolf's initial reaction to her memory of molestation] seems to show that a feeling about certain parts of the body; how they must not be touched; how it is wrong to allow them to be touched; must be instinctive. It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 1882, but was born many thousand years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestress in the past (69).

In this passage, Woolf not only acknowledges the forgotten history of women, but she actualizes it through a shift in writing voice--from singular to plural, from 'I' to 'we,' born through "ancestress." She comes to figure herself as a plural subject of sexual violence, and in such, refigures her identity outside the paradigm that has rendered her an individual object trapped within the confines of a patriarchal mirror construction. As Woolf rejects the singularity of her own birth, and thus of



her traditional subjectivity, she interrupts the invisible ideology that has contributed to the deauthorization of women's pasts. Quite simply, Woolf shatters the mirror.

### iii. Social mirrors and mirror-games

The scene of the molestation in the mirror is followed by several scenes in which mirrors as metaphorical constructions create other social expectations for women. Literally, these scenes are the preparatory stages for Woolf's initiation into Victorian society as the daughter of an educated man, where she becomes a sexually available object to the gaze of men. As she considers the significant topic of how her brother and father introduced her to proper society, Woolf struggles to exist outside the constructions of Edwardian culture, both as a 'self' and a 'self who writes.' For Woolf, the memory of Victorian society persists in the Edwardian drawing room, the paternal world of 22 Hyde Park Gate, "a world of many men" (143). As Woolf constructs this location within her memoir, she writes, "Hyde Park Gate in 1900 was a complete model of Victorian society" (147). For Woolf, the mirror of Victorian society is embodied by the codes of behavior and public presentation dictated by her father and half-brother, George Duckworth (not the same half-brother who molested her).

For upper-class Victorians, these codes of behavior were not merely symbolic, but literal rules of manners, appearance, and speech for negotiating the heterosexual politics of the Victorian drawing room. After the death of Woolf's mother in 1895, her father began demanding overtly feminine behavior from his

daughters (Bell 42). Leslie Stephen, Woolf's father, established specific roles for his daughters to emulate: he demanded the girls' act the feminine role of "part slave, part angel" (Woolf 146). Woolf specifically notes the unwritten rules of Victorian feminine subjectivity, manifested through feelings of constraint. Woolf writes, "Victorian society exerts its pressure...we [Woolf and Vanessa, her sister] must be tidied and in our places...we became young ladies possessed of a certain manner" (148-149). The Victorian "pressure," Woolf calls attention to illustrates the function of the mirror, which constrains women's subjectivity by reproducing cultural authority. As Woolf concentrates on the way the mirror dictates subjectivity through a sense of unilateral force, she gets at the construction of the mirror which dislocates women from empowered positions and as authors of their own subjectivity.

For Woolf, it is important to the transgressive aims of her text to create a separation between the mirrors of her own oppression, and those which foster a sense of agency--a mirror she constructs. As Woolf explains the way various literal and metaphoric mirrors function in her life, she is also able to make their images the object of criticism as well. This occurs in Woolf's text after she describes the roles and particular codes of behavior she is expected to embody. She theorizes this socialization process, writing:

Victorian manner...was not natural for Vanessa or myself. We learned it...Nobody every broke convention. If you listened, as I did, it was like watching a game. One had to know the rules" (150).

Immediately, Woolf recognizes the Victorian standard of femininity as a

construction, noting the process of socialization and learned behavior over innate qualities of women. Woolf's characterization of the proper behavior for Victorian women as "watching a game" is her ironic awareness that even as she is playing "the role in the game" she is turning the social mirror of Victorian culture against itself. Woolf exploits the subject/object construction of the mirror to render Victorian ideology an object. From this location, Woolf gives the reader of her memoir an awareness that even though she does not make the rules she can make her "listening" function ironically. In other words, as Woolf "mirrors the mirror," she creates a new construction and crafts an authority from beyond the framing of Victorian culture and interrupts its power to construct her.

Simply because Woolf recognizes feminine subjectivity as an oppressive construct, however, does not mean she is uninfluenced by it. Beyond merely theorizing Victorian codes of behavior, Woolf specifically addresses the effects of those codes and the subsequent processes of instituting them within the lives of women. As Woolf describes the way women's identities are constructed, Woolf uses metaphors emphasizing her goal of interrupting particular constructions of the mirror while simultaneously engaging in creative, game-like mimicry. She writes:

But if father had the larger lines of the [Victorian] age stamped on him, George filled them in with a crisscross, with a crow quill etching of the most minute details. No more perfect fossil of the Victorian age could exist. And so, while father preserved the framework of the 1860, George filled in the framework with all kinds of minutely-teethed saws; and the machine into which our rebellious bodies were inserted in 1900 not only held us tight in its framework, but bit into us with innumerable sharp teeth (151-152).

Woolf imagines the Victorian social mirror as an assault on her body, as she is

rendered a passive object to patriarchal conceptions of femininity. Victorian ideology, or the “mirror,” is characterized as a machine in this passage. While a traditional modernist reading of the machine would regard it as a symbol of industry and progress, for Woolf, the machine becomes a repressive instrument to preserve the past in order to produce the future. Through the concept of production, Woolf objectifies the process of identity construction itself, giving it an ironic turn. That is, Woolf comes to control the process itself through her objectifying language. Her objectification, however, does not exist to reduce the impact of this experience, for Woolf is careful to reveal the ways in which the construction of the mirror leaves lasting and invasive effects. As Woolf likens her experience of identity production to that of being bit into by “minutely-teethed *saws*,” she connotes the violence and penetration involved in the Victorian world, revealing that the Victorian upper-class standard for women is not an external experience; it cuts beneath the skin. This wounding further echoes and underscores Woolf’s earlier recollection of her molestation. Objectifying the process of acquiring an appropriate Victorian, upper-class, feminine identity reveals what is ignored through these constructions of femininity. Woolf can engage playfully with this construction through the power of language. Just as her male relatives can write upon her body through “stamps” and “crow quill etchings,” so too can Woolf use the power of language to write about these oppressive constructions as she constructs her “self” outside its parameters.

For all of Woolf’s awareness of mirror-games, Woolf knows her younger

self would have found it difficult to step completely out of these feminine limitations and expectations. In one example, Woolf narrates an experience in which she initiates the gaze herself, attempting to embody the image of the young, Victorian socialite. Preparing herself for her coming-out party in the drawing room of Hyde Park Gate, Woolf, age 18, puts on her new dress, descends the stairs, and enters this highly symbolic moment of actualizing her expected Victorian demeanor. Woolf writes:

He [George] at once fixed on me that extraordinarily observant scrutiny with which he always inspected our clothes. He looked me up and down for a moment as if I were a horse brought into the show ring...it was the look or moral, of social disapproval, as if he scented some kind of insurrection, of defiance of his accepted standards. I knew myself condemned (151).

The act of looking, which constitutes the function of the mirror, dominates in this passage. Literally, Woolf is the object of the patriarchal gaze of Victorian culture. She is observed, inspected, and scrutinized. Each of these acts cause Woolf to be “fixed” -- frozen in the moment of the mirror and trapped within its frame. As Woolf likens her moment within the mirror to that of the appraisal of a show horse, the truly grotesque superficiality of the mirror and its production of appropriate feminine subjectivities is revealed. The metaphor of the show horse functions to convey the experience within the mirror as overtly animalistic, as well as in the way George can ‘sniff out’ Woolf’s inadequacies. Even as Woolf recounts feelings of powerlessness and objectification associated with the gaze of the mirror, she is nonetheless able to critique this construction as well. This moment, while fraught with passive language and positioning, is nonetheless a

self-conscious, self-reflexive, retelling.

In her final documented moment in front of the Victorian mirror, Woolf transgresses its construction both as a self within the mirror and the self who writes. This scene reveals the most ignored function behind a patriarchal desire to construct oppressive feminine subjectivities-- the fear of women to authorize their own identities. In this last moment within the Victorian social mirror, Woolf enters as a refusing subject. This time, in the family drawing room, Woolf foregrounds herself as a violating offender to Victorian norms as she wears the green dress George condemned her for wearing earlier. Imagining how George, her social sponsor, might read her defiance, she senses masculine anxiety about her self-inventive move in wearing the green dress. She writes:

Any defiance therefore was unfamiliar to him; and my green dress set ringing in him a thousand alarm bells. It was extreme; it was artistic; it was not what nice people thought nice. Was that the formula, he said to himself, as he saw me come into the room? Did he too feel that it threatened something in himself? Was I somehow casting a shadow in his world; pointing a finger of scorn at him? (152).

Woolf uncovers a surprising reaction from George, as she recognizes her deviance threatens something in him. Laura Mulvey articulates the threat of the mirror as a function of power. She writes, "Thus the woman as icon displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety in originally signified" (591). Mulvey's argument is premised on the notion that subjectivity is constructed to signify sexual difference. When one deviates from that difference, it threatens to undo the power structures that stabilize the construction of the gaze. Specifically, the threat Woolf isolates in

George, is the fear of women to authorize their own entry into the mirror, as Woolf does by wearing the forbidden, green dress. In this way, Woolf is able to refigure her body and her reflection beyond the mirror, and instead project an authority through creative means--her "extreme" and "artistic" dress.

#### iv. Unfixing the subject

As Woolf writes about her young womanhood reflected in masculine mirrors, she is also reframing the autobiographer's task as one of disrupting the subject/object relationship. As Shari Benstock notes, autobiography, as a genre, suggests that "the subject is made an object of investigation" (Benstock 19). Thus, as Benstock continues, "this view of life history is grounded in authority" (19). Therefore, the suggestion is, in order to reframe the subject/object relationship one must refigure the conception of the subject's authority over the object. Woolf's final step of deconstructing the construction of the mirror, is to take the mirror as a figure of autobiographical rewriting. Woolf recognizes the inadequacy of the mirror as a symbolic representation of the autobiographical process as she writes early in "A Sketch of the Past," "What I write today I should not write in a year's time" (75). While the Victorian tradition would confirm the notion of a fixed subjectivity, Woolf works to illustrate how memory threatens the assumed security found in a cohesive subjectivity. In this way, Woolf actively refigures the consciousness of the authorial "I," as a creative act rather than a mere reflection of things past.

We see Woolf's refiguring of her authorial position early in "A Sketch of

the Past” as Woolf relates her “first memory.” Before proceeding to the “next memory,” however, Woolf pauses to consider the process of recalling a memory itself. This consideration has a function of opening up memory and challenging its assumptions as the process of merely retelling. For Woolf, memory becomes far different from translating a mirrored-image of the past. She signals her confrontations in this regard by envisioning herself as a painter. This places an emphasis on the visual, artistic, and sensory effect of memory on the subject, and not on the objectification of memory under the Victorian paradigm. She writes:

If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. There was the pale yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers. I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent...I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline (66).

The qualities Woolf sets forth for memory involve the dimensions of memory itself-- “globular” and “semi-transparent.” That is, memory has depth and complexity. Woolf furthers the notion that autobiography does not exist in a one-to-one relationship between the “real” memory and its recollection in the text. As Woolf details memory’s fleeting presence through its inability to be fully seen or captured, she proves memory is never a reflection because it will always look differently depending on one’s location, whether literal, figurative, or conceptual.

Despite the distance Woolf acknowledges between the autobiographical subject and the autobiographer, she is nonetheless able to convey the activity of memory for her reader through her attention to detail and sensory appeal.

Emphasizing memory’s relation to sense impression is a reembodiment of memory



itself. Andrew Zwerdling calls attention to Woolf's sensual tendency of memory noting, "Her goal is less to interpret the past than to see, hear, touch, smell, and feel it" (184). In other words, her memory is not manifested by holding a mirror up to the past, rather Woolf adopts the role of a painter whose concern is the presentation of something true to the senses of the memory, as opposed to the literal happenings within the memory. As Woolf announces, "I should make a picture...I should make curved shapes," we see her actively crafting memory. Clearly, Woolf agrees to a principle of uncertainty when telling the past, but this does not undermine her autobiographical authority because Woolf does not claim it through the objective image a mirror promises. Rather Woolf's authority exists through the subjective power memory has to produce varied responses. Woolf has shaken loose the constraints of an autobiographical convention which insists on an objective past, giving her the freedom to construct a different subjectivity in a different autobiography.

## Conclusions

The awareness of autobiography as a patriarchal tradition, and more immediately as a Victorian tradition, and subsequently an inadequate tradition for women, is the foregrounding critique as Woolf struggles to explain her cryptic remark to Ethel Smyth, "There has never been a woman's autobiography." Woolf takes issue with the masculinist assumptions of unity concerning representations of time and authority. For Woolf, her subjectivity is more than a translation of past experiences or the knowledge of a genealogical past that renders her authorial identity intact. This script has been interrupted by Woolf's invocation of a fragmented identity. Her fragmentation reaches beyond a simple division of time, and into that of the writer's role in the compositional process. She admits that her role as a writer influences her perception of who she was and who she is. It is not simply a matter of a separation of identities, but rather of the fluidity of identity itself. Just as identity is fluid, so too is the form of autobiography. By reshaping and reordering the narrative itself, Woolf finds room for movement outside the chronological script of male accomplishment through creative means. She renders the autobiography present and active. That is, instead of merely remembering, Woolf is engaged in recreating.

This recreating insists that Woolf is paramountly concerned with what individuals can produce to challenge institutional exclusion. Woolf's assertions

for transgressive gestures in *Three Guineas*, is consistent with the type of conventional undoing Woolf engages in within "A Sketch of the Past." Woolf writes:

The main distinction between us who are outside society and you who are inside society must be that whereas you will make use of the means provided by your position--...we, remaining outside, will experiment not with public means in public but with private means in private. Those experiments will not be merely critical but creative (*Three Guineas* 113).

For Woolf, the real power to transform culture is born out of the ability to creatively change what already belongs to the "outsider." Within "A Sketch of the Past," the mirror becomes this private territory for Woolf to enact her creative disruption.

Mirrors exist literally and metaphorically as figures of self-reference throughout Woolf's text. She explores the ways in which mirrors come to frame her subjectivity, but she concentrates on the reductive nature of mirrors as conceived of within the patriarchal ideology of Victorian culture. Woolf, however, does not remain framed within the confines of these various mirrors. Rather, through ironic reflection on mirrored presences and processes, she subverts the notion that these experiences are merely personal. Instead, Woolf extends their function and emphasizes fluctuation-- she sees herself as part of a collective experience of womanhood, and finds discursive and creative strategies to justify her own authority beyond the conceptions of the conventional mirror.

While Woolf clearly struggles with the way in which her own experience has been co-opted by the reflections of dominant culture, we can also read Woolf's

interactions with mirrors from the perspective of genre considerations as well. That is, the Victorian autobiographical standard possesses many of the same characteristics as the mirror, such as the subject/object relationship, and the invisible assumption of cultural ideology. As Woolf prepares herself to write a "woman's autobiography," she positions herself in front of a mirror that demands a particular reflection manifested through Victorian conventions of selfhood. As Woolf meets this mirror, however, she refuses its reflection. The reflection Woolf must struggle with is what exists in the background, and this is her inherited tradition of Victorianism, or the invisible ideology which caused her to say to Ethel Smyth in 1940, "there's never been a woman's autobiography." As Woolf rejects Victorian conventions of autobiography, she shatters the mirror, and is left with a pile of broken glass - an experimental rewriting of the genre and its figures. The creative possibility of this writing is that the shards may be rearranged to form a new shape, create a new function, and institute a different conception of what it means to look at the self.

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