

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE

FACULTY OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ANGLOPHONE LITERATURES AND CULTURES

ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

THE PROBLEM OF THE FIXITY OF TABLES: VIRGINIA WOOLF AS A NON-
DUALIST AND PROCESS-ORIENTED THINKER

PROBLÉM HMOTNÉHO SVĚTA: VIRGINIE WOOLFOVÁ JAKO NEDUALISTICKÁ A
PROCESUÁLNÍ MYSLITELKA

DISSERTATION THESIS SUMMARY

TEZE DIZERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

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2021

1. Introduction to Virginia Woolf's Philosophy

Virginia Woolf's fiction is largely concerned with the main interests of philosophical enquiry, particularly with epistemological questions of our knowledge of the external world and ontological notions such as being, materiality, or subjectivity. Like her father Leslie Stephen, who in his essay "What is Materialism?" argues that scientists are good at describing material substance, but they do not know how to integrate feelings and experience in these descriptions, Woolf rejects the notion of scientific materialism and searches for new ways to bridge the gap between the material and the mental in her fiction. In her essays "On Being Ill" and "The New Biography" Woolf argues that the body and the mind, the solid and the ephemeral, the granite and the rainbow, are always interrelated like "like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea."¹

Therefore, Woolf echoes the concerns of the early 20th century physics that can no longer be described as the "physics of matter" but the "physics of energy," which rejects the notion of purely physical substance. Bertrand Russell, Woolf's friend and a member of the Bloomsbury Group, claims that our knowledge of material objects is very limited except for the fact that these represent "mental events that we directly experience,"² and Alfred North Whitehead, mathematician and philosopher, in his book *Science and the Modern World* argues against scientific materialism, accuses physics of advocating "irreducible brute matter"³ and claims that experience should be included in the very stuff from which this world is made up. Woolf shares with these thinkers the necessity to redefine the notions of "things,"

1. Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill," in *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw. Oxford: OUP, 2009), 101.

2. Bertrand Russell, "Mind and Matter," in *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2021), 139.

3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 17.

or “objects,” and undermine their solidity or “fixity.”⁴ Woolf does so mainly in her short stories “The Mark on the Wall” or “Solid Objects,” where she, on the one hand, focuses on the solidity of objects, a mark on the wall or pieces of broken glass and china, but, on the other hand, describes these objects as impermanent, changeable, and active in their own way. In “Solid Objects” the lump of glass collected by John decomposes and “recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain,” which leads to its entanglement with John’s “stuff of thought.”⁵

Moreover, objects that abound in Woolf’s fiction are endowed with their own proto-conscious experience and they often have impact on human and nonhuman subjects in their environment. This is demonstrated in Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*, where the light from the lighthouse adopts certain human qualities, for example the rocks and the cliffs seem to be conscious of each other and Lily’s canvas “rebukes” the artist and “spreads peace through her mind.”⁶ Therefore, Woolf’s description of the nature of objects opposes the traditional notion of pieces of permanent matter separated from living human observers and also reconceptualizes the bifurcation into active subjects and inert objects. Accordingly, it may be suggested that Woolf provides a perspective of materiality similar to theories such as panpsychism, which claims that “physical constituents of the universe have mental properties, whether or not they are parts of living organisms,”⁷ and more importantly to process philosophy, which relativizes the distinction between the subject and object and does not define material objects by their physical properties but “in terms of processual activities and stabilities” and by what they “do.”⁸ Woolf’s depiction of enminded objects in her fiction is

4. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), 162.

5. Virginia Woolf, “Solid Objects,” in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Harcourt, 1989), 105.

6. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 171.

7. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 181.

8. Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 52.

strikingly similar to Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism, which suggests that each element of the universe is in itself a "feeling" or "prehending" subject.

In her late works, Woolf turns her attention from the philosophical enquiry into the nature of the universe towards the investigation of identity and definition of one's self vis-à-vis a larger community of human and nonhuman beings. From 1930s onwards Woolf seems to undermine the sense of strong and self-sufficient ego, explores the intersubjectivity and focuses of one's interrelation with other entities within a single unified whole. After experiments with multiple and historical selves in *Orlando*, in *The Waves* Woolf introduces her idea of a personal identity conceived as something processual and constantly changing. She creates an intersubjective community of six, or seven, characters where an individual identity "was overcome" because "we are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities."⁹ In addition, this novel also foregrounds its characters' rootedness in their natural environment and the indistinct line between a human body and the external physical world. This idea of identity is strikingly similar to process philosophy's concept of identity and a human being, which, on the one hand, may be defined as a society of one's experience from the birth to death and, on the other hand, as a social entity since "there is no society in isolation."¹⁰ In terms of the human and the natural entanglement, it can be again analysed via Whitehead's philosophy of organism, which emphasizes that there is no clear separation between one's body and the environment as "the body is part of the external world, continuous with it."¹¹

9. Woolf, *The Waves*, 66.

10. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 90.

11. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 21.

Woolf elaborates on this organic mode of being in her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past,” where she explicitly talks about her “personal philosophy” based on the interconnection of all human beings in a single work of art:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art.¹²

As suggested by scholars, Woolf does not refer to philosophy as to an academic discipline but, rather, as a set of her personal beliefs¹³ backed up by her knowledge of various philosophical ideas and concepts. Moreover, this philosophy is in no way abstract, but always closely tied to the everyday, to one’s relation to other human and nonhuman beings. As suggested in the aforementioned quotation, Woolf’s attempt to “sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts”¹⁴ was inspired by the idea that there is some pattern, some ontological bond that interweaves all existence. Therefore, it may be concluded that Woolf devises a creative ontology¹⁵ of interconnection similar to Whitehead’s organic ontology, where creativity and universal relationality represent the main principles of “becoming,” or concrescence, during which “the many becomes one, and are increased by one.”¹⁶ Moreover, this universal relationality of Whitehead’s metaphysical system acquires a significant ethical dimension. Since each constituents of reality, in Whitehead’s terms each “actual entity,” is at the same time a subject of its own experience and object that can be

12. Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Harcourt, 1985), 72.

13. Hagen, “Bloomsbury and Philosophy,” in *The Handbook to the Bloomsbury Group*, ed. Derek Ryan and Stephen Ross (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 146.

14. Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw. Oxford: OUP, 2009), 85.

15. Hagen, 146.

16. Whitehead, *Process*, 21.

integrated into the becoming of other subjects, it has “some value for itself, for others and for the whole.”¹⁷

Similarly, it may be claimed that Woolf’s ontology based on the entanglement of the subject and object, and the human and the nonhuman foregrounded in her early works, gradually develops into “ontoethics”¹⁸ in her late oeuvre. In *Three Guineas* she emphasized the need to fight the war peacefully by a change in our thinking, behaviour, and education, and she urges all human beings to admit that “a common interest unites us; it is one world, one life”¹⁹ and practice solidarity based on this connection. In her posthumously published “novel” *Between the Acts*, she draws together a heterogeneous community threatened by the outbreak of the Second World War and she criticizes the artificial and hypocritical divisions and walls that members of society build between each other, which results in the dissolution of community into “orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves.”²⁰ She emphasizes the value of each member of the community, which is grounded on the fact that “we are members of one another.”²¹

In addition, Woolf extends this value also to the nonhuman natural environment, for example when Mrs Swithin in *Between the Acts* exclaims that “Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one,”²² or when the effect of the play within the novel results in dissolution of the boundary between “Man the Master” and “the Brute.” These quotations suggest that Woolf systematically worked towards the critique of anthropocentrism in her works, which is foregrounded in some of her essays, for example in “Flying over London” when the

17. Whitehead, *Modes*, 111.

18. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1

19. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 163.

20. Virginia Woolf, “Between the Acts,” in *The Years & Between the Acts* (Ware, Wordsworth Classics, 2012), 394.

21. Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 396.

22. Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 388.

experience of flying forces Woolf to “rescale”²³ human experience or in her “London Scene essays,” where she criticizes the exploitation of natural resources and hints at destructive human action that goes hand in hand with the commodity culture and “imperial capitalism” of her time. Interestingly, Whitehead also rejected the inveterate anthropocentrism by stating that a human being is only “one among other natural objects.”²⁴ Moreover, while discussing the relation between humans and the natural environment, he claims that the evil of the modern society is “the ignorance of the true relation of each organism to its environment” and the neglect of “the intrinsic worth of the environment.”²⁵ Hence, it is possible to draw a tentative conclusion that Woolf’s and Whitehead’s attempt to redefine identity and subjectivity in a more “impersonal” or “subjectless” mode, which would enhance one’s intimate relation with the environment, may be regarded as a way to step out of the anthropocentric perspective of being and cultivate “a democracy of fellow creatures.”²⁶ This also manifests that Woolf’s personal philosophy outlined in this brief summary is inseparable from her activism and social feminism, and that it is oriented towards the establishment of a future society, a more inclusive and equal community, which “will not be divided by hedges anymore”²⁷ or “bifurcated” in the Whiteheadian sense.

23. Holly Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70.

24. Whitehead, *Modes*, 144.

25. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 196.

26. Whitehead, *Process*, 50.

27. Virginia Woolf, “The Leaning Tower,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 6: 1933–1941*. ed. Stuart N. Clarke (London: The Hogarth Press, 2011), 267.

2. Methodology and Objective

This dissertation examines the way Virginia Woolf defies various dualisms rooted in the discourse of the early 20th century society, art, and science. Particularly, it is concerned with the dualisms of the subject and object, body and mind, the animate and the inanimate, individual and community, and last but not least, the human and the nonhuman. It is suggested that Woolf attempts to reconcile and “bridge” these dualisms in her fiction and that her “personal philosophy” analysed in this thesis represents a possible practice of “non-binary” mode of thought. This nondualist reasoning, Woolf’s perspective of reality and the natural world, are analysed via, and compared to, the process philosophy, particularly Alfred North Whitehead’s “philosophy of organism” introduced in his 1920 book *The Concept of Nature* and his 1929 opus magnum *Process and Reality*. The dates of publication of these philosophical works suggest not only that Woolf and Whitehead were contemporaries but that they were interested in the same questions. In 1920 Woolf publishes her short story “Solid Objects,” where she deals with the relation between the subject and object and suggests that the two are interrelated. Whitehead’s *The Concept of Nature* contains chapters on human perception in relation to objects and suggests that the subject and object are entangled in an “percipient event.”²⁸ Moreover, this book introduces Whitehead’s famous rejection of “the bifurcation of nature,”²⁹ which originally criticizes the distinction between the subjective experience of nature and the existence of objects in nature, but it is later expended and applied also to the distinction between “senseless, valueless, purposeless”³⁰ matter and an experiencing organism, an individual and other entities, and last but not least a “society” and its environment. For this reason, Whitehead’s nondualist process-oriented ontology represents a convenient critical framework, which permits an interesting and original analysis of Woolf’s

28. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), 70.

29. Whitehead, *The Concept*, 21.

30. Whitehead, *Science*, 17-18.

own nondualist philosophy outlined in her fiction. Although the Woolfs probably met the Whiteheads either in Ottoline Morrell's Garsington House thanks to Bertrand Russell, or at the ball celebrating the end of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1912, which is mentioned in Woolf's autobiographical essay "Old Bloomsbury," there is no direct evidence that Woolf ever read Whitehead's philosophical works. She might have read some works written by her friend Bertrand Russell, who was Whitehead's student and co-author of his *Principia Mathematica*, therefore, she might have been influenced by Whitehead only indirectly. Whereas the two philosophers' ideas are very similar in many respects, the paths of these two men diverged not only literally, but also in terms of the elaboration on their early ideas. In fact, the influence of Russell's theories on Woolf's writing, studied by many scholars and most masterfully by Ann Banfield in her book *The Phantom Table*, also cannot be proven with certainty because Woolf herself admits in her diary that instead of attending Russell's public lectures, she preferred to attend a more exciting performance: "They were going to hear Bertie lecture; I preferred the songsters of Trafalgar Square."³¹ Therefore, this thesis does not apply a "direct influence model" of Whitehead's thought on Woolf's fiction but "a zeitgeist model."³² This allows demonstrating that both Woolf and Whitehead lived and created their oeuvres at the time of ground-breaking changes in science, philosophy, and society, which are very markedly reflected in their works. Similarly, the thesis compares the main ideas of Woolf's and Whitehead's philosophy to the main ideas of Post-Impressionist conception of nature and the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, which amplifies the shifting mode of thought of the early 20th century.

31. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 1: 1915-1919*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), 270.

32. Rachel Crossland, *Modernist Physics: Waves, Particles, and Relativities in the Writings of Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4-5.

Although Woolf admired “philosophical” literature that provides “a different method of approach and a different direction”³³ and her own writing may be described as “philosophically literary,”³⁴ she worked with philosophical and scientific theories in her works very unsystematically and she often borrowed carelessly very diverse concepts. Therefore, to claim that there was a direct and intentional link between Woolf’s fiction and Whitehead’s thoughts would be, at the very least, misleading. Moreover, it cannot be excluded that Whitehead might have been indirectly influenced by his contemporary literature like in the case of the Romantic poetry, which, according to Whitehead, at the turn of the 18th and 19th century had pioneered the concept of organic nature before it was later described and embraced by science.³⁵ Although this thesis might appear to represent another “paratactic coordination”³⁶ between a philosopher’s metaphysical system and Woolf’s writing, this thesis reaches beyond this parallelism, expands the field of possible influences on Woolf’s writing and suggests that if there was a philosophical approach which could describe Woolf’s philosophy, it would most likely be Whitehead’s process thought. Moreover, one of the secondary objectives of this thesis is also to bring Whitehead’s philosophy of organism back to life and demonstrate that it is a system of thought which can easily serve not only as an appropriate tool for literary analysis but also as a critical approach to contemporary issues such as the need to bring the humans closer to their environment or strengthen the bonds between individuals to create an interconnected community. In conclusion, as this thesis suggests particularly in its last chapters, both Woolf and Whitehead attempted to envisage a possible world, a more habitable universe, where the value of each organism would be recognized and where the Whiteheadian bifurcations between the subject and object, the

33. Woolf, “Philosophy in Fiction,” 209.

34. Hagen, 139.

35. Whitehead, *Science*, 88.

36. Hagen, 137.

animate and the inanimate, the human and the nonhuman, the individual and the community, would be entirely obliterated.

3. Structure

After the introduction, which provides a summary of scholarship on philosophy in Woolf's fiction and outlines the main ideas of Woolf's "personal philosophy," each of the four following chapters focuses on one kind of dualism, or bifurcation, which Woolf rejects in her fiction. Woolf's approach to dismantling the dualism in question is always compared to Whitehead's reconciliation of the same binary.

The first chapter analyses how Woolf reconceptualizes the notion of material substance, conceives of the relation between the subject and object in her early short fiction and the novel *To the Lighthouse* and how she erases the distinction between these two entities. This is analysed via Whitehead's conception of the universe made of constantly changing "actual entities" and "societies" and process of "conrescence" and "prehension," during which the subject and the object merge into one.

The second chapter analyses Woolf's inclination to panpsychism, for example in *To the Lighthouse* or *Orlando*, and the description of objects as feeling, or "prehending," entities, whose experience is not utterly different from the conscious experience of human beings. This is analysed mainly through Whitehead's own experimentation with "proto-conscious" actual entities that can experience their environment. Moreover, the chapter also focuses on Woolf's depiction of animal experience and her subtle critique of human superiority by attributing a degree of experience to every animate and inanimate entity, for example in her short story "Kew Gardens" or novella *Flush*. This is likened to Whitehead's revision of boundaries between humans and other animal species, which comes to the foreground especially in contemporary Whiteheadian scholarship.

The third chapter is concerned with Woolf's idea of personal identity, which she devises as something shifting, continuous and non-fixed, as it develops with every experience one acquires. This view of self is very similar to processual notion of self, which is, on the

one hand, defined as a society composed of its “experience, extending from birth to the present moment”³⁷ and, on the other hand, a togetherness of multiple interrelated entities. Woolf introduces this idea of identity in most of her fiction but most noticeably in *Orlando*, where the protagonist modifies his/her identity with the ongoing temporal shift and acknowledges that his/her many selves are parts of the “Key self,” and in *The Waves*, where Woolf anticipates her turn from individualism to interconnected community in her late works. This multiplicity within an individual and in terms of one’s relation to their environment is analysed by means of Whitehead’s societies, which are always part of larger wholes and that bear “value for itself, for others and for the whole.”³⁸

The last chapter elaborates on the ethical aspect of Woolf’s and Whitehead’s idea of identity and discusses Woolf’s characters’ entanglement with the natural world and the writer’s critique of anthropocentrism featuring in her late novels. This levelling of the human and the nonhuman stands out in her “London Scene essays,” particularly in “The Docks of London,” where Woolf criticizes the propagation of human needs at the cost of the natural environment’s destruction, or in “The Sun and the Fish,” where she imagines the possibility of human extinction. This nonhuman and environmental turn in Woolf’s fiction is analysed through Whitehead’s attempt to undermine the notion of subjectivity conceived as something that exists prior to its environment and redefine it as a notion emerging from the objective data in its environment. As some scholars suggest, this idea of subjectivity is similar to that of deep ecology³⁹ and lays the foundations of Whitehead’s own version of environmental ethics. Woolf’s own emphasis on the human continuity with the environment, and her critique of destructive human action, for example in *Mrs Dalloway*, where Septimus protests against

37. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 63.

38. Whitehead, *Modes*, 111.

39. John B. Cobb, “Deep Ecology and Process Thought,” *Process Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 121–130, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44798386>.

cutting of trees and preaches “the universal love,” reveals Woolf’s concern with environmental issues, her dislike of the bifurcation between the human and the natural, and also her critique of the modern capitalism and imperialist policy. Therefore, the last chapter, much more than the previous ones, demonstrates that both Woolf and Whitehead may play their part in the contemporary debates about the position of humans in the Anthropocene and suggests that their process-oriented philosophy, which deconstructs the long-established dualisms, may represent one of possible critical backgrounds for a more sustainable and just conception of the universe.

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5. Mgr. Veronika Krajíčková: Overview of Academic Activities

PUBLICATIONS

Essays in Scholarly Journals:

Geyerová, Veronika. "Merged Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's Works." *Hradec Králové Journal of Anglophone Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2018): pp. 58-66.

Article entitled "Virginia Woolf's "Ontoethics" in her Late Oeuvre from the Perspective of Alfred North Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism" is due to be published in *Process Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2021).

Reviews for Iliteratura.cz:

Including Woolf's essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*

link to all texts <http://www.iliteratura.cz/Redaktor/1373/veronika-krajickova>

Translations:

Mathewson R.L. *Hra s Láskou*, Mladá fronta 2015.

Woolf, Virginia. "Náčrt minulosti" (a part of "A Sketch of the Past"), *Host*, no. 6 (2015): pp. 62-67.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

Transdisciplinary PhD Conference at University of Warsaw (2018): "Virginia Woolf and her Manifestations of Consciousness as the Integral Part of Material Reality"

Hradec Králové Conference of Anglophone Studies (2018): "Merged Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's Works"

5th European Summer School in Process Thought (2018, České Budějovice): "Reading Virginia Woolf from the Perspective of Process Philosophy"

29th Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf (2019, Mount St. Joseph University, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA): "Unifying and Equalizing Tendencies in Woolf's Fiction from the Perspective of Process Philosophy"

New Work in Modernist Studies Conference (2020, organized by British Association of Modernist Studies, Edinburgh): "Virginia Woolf and Process-Oriented Ontology"

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

"Anglo-American Modernist Women Authors" (Charles University, Winter Term 2020/2021)

"Virginia Woolf: Various Thematic and Critical Approaches" (Charles University, Summer Term 2020/2021)