

## Virginia Woolf's Story of Growth: *Night and Day* as Posttraumatic Writing<sup>1</sup>

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### 1

Virginia Woolf lived a life of suffering, and her writing was a form of release. Her writing process corresponds with her personal growth and positive life changes. Studies on personal experiences of trauma indicate that Woolf's struggles and subsequent literary success are a manifestation of posttraumatic growth (PTG). While it is well known that Woolf went through various traumatic events—deaths of loved ones, illness, and war—over the course of her life, the suffering informed her writing, which functioned as a means for positive change and growth. Focusing on Woolf's childlessness, *Night and Day* (1919) reflects the sequence of her infertility, coping process, and spiritual growth.

Posttraumatic studies have identified a sequence in which one's experience of a highly critical event is followed by personal growth. In the field of psychology, the negative aspects of stressful events have been fully discussed, but the positive ones have not. Although the idea that negative events could enable one to experience something fruitful had been known in history—as we say, “spare the rod and spoil the child,” for example—a psychological notion to explain this only appeared around 2000. Regarding the positive aspects of a critical situation, Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, leading scholars in the PTG studies, explain that “the frightening and confusing aftermath of trauma, where fundamental assumptions are severely challenged, can be fertile ground for unexpected outcomes that can be observed in survivors: posttraumatic growth” (“Conceptual Foundations” 1). The authors re-define the term “trauma,” the cause of PTG, resulting from a broad range of critical personal experiences, from highly stressful events to serious accidents involving injury or death, and focus on the experiences of growth that followed such “traumatic” events.<sup>2</sup>

According to posttraumatic theory, the experience of a traumatic event and the coping process that follows result in positive life changes, enabling the person to see things differently. Using a metaphor of an earthquake, Tedeschi and Calhoun explain that “a psychologically seismic event can severely shake, threaten, or reduce to rubble many of the schematic structures that have guided understanding, decision making, and meaningfulness” (“Conceptual Foundations” 5). To systematically measure one's growth, they divide the outcomes of PTG into five categories: “personal strength” followed by “increased sense of self-reliance”; “relating to others” with “positive changes in relationships”; “new possibilities,” which “can be experienced through developing new interests, activities, or habits, or by building a new career”; “appreciation of life” with “a greater appreciation for all the things” in life; and “spiritual and existential change” concerning “religious beliefs, spiritual matters,

and existential/ philosophical questions” (*Theory, Research, and Applications* 26–27). This enables observing one’s changes more objectively and determining the type of growth.

## 2

To Virginia Woolf, childlessness was both a physical and sexual problem and a factor that bound her to patriarchy. After her marriage to Leonard Woolf in 1912, she wished to have children, but her husband decided against due to the condition of her health. Woolf’s mother, Julia Stephen, had seven children and was a typical Victorian mother who always stayed at the center of the family and took well care of her husband and children.<sup>3</sup> As Woolf later wrote about her mother, “the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went my day’s doing. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life” (*Moments* 80). Although Julia died in 1895 when Woolf was 13, she remained an influence for the rest of Woolf’s life. Reflecting on her preoccupation with the Victorian maternal figure of her mother, Woolf was confronted with childlessness. In addition to the diary entries and letters describing her struggles, the social and ideological circumstances further contributed to placing Woolf in a stressful situation.

Given its interrelationship with the female body and identity, an unfulfilled desire for children can potentially turn into a “trauma.” Childlessness has been often a critical problem for many women, who are compulsively required to fulfill female social roles, and has been discussed from various angles. Iris Marion Young, for example, argues that, referring to the female power symbolized by the peace, wholeness, and purity of mother Mary, “[f]or centuries, identification with that power has bonded women to the patriarchal order” (84). Also, as Nancy Chodorow insists, motherhood can be regarded as a product of “role training” because “women’s mothering, like other aspects of gender activity, is a product of feminine role training and role identification. Girls are taught to be mothers, trained to for nurturance, and told that they ought to mother” (31). Throughout history, becoming a mother has been regarded as an essential part of a woman’s life. Under such conditions of patriarchy, the women do not fulfill the ideal of motherhood are labeled as imperfect or improper.

In fact, some critics refer to the infertility experience as a cause of trauma followed by post-traumatic growth. In “Posttraumatic Growth and Social Support in Individuals with Infertility” (2010), Paul et al. state that infertility can be considered as a cause of stress that can threaten one’s life and often results in deep trauma:

Cross-culturally, the infertility experience is recognized as a stressor event with the potential to cause havoc in the lives of individuals, couples and families. . . .

. . . As the experience of infertility and the medical interventions required to treat it may challenge one’s concept of health, wholeness and physical integrity, infertility is often quite traumatic. This trauma may be further reinforced by complex and disenfranchised losses, i.e. hopes, dreams and social roles. . . . (133–34)

While that experience of failing to have children is distinguished from death or fatal accidents, it could be traumatic enough to change one's perspective on life and relationships.

Woolf's desire for children seems to gain in strength when her sister Vanessa Bell becomes a mother. Despite the meager sense of rivalry they shared, Vanessa first took over their mother Julia's Victorian motherhood role. When Vanessa married Clive Bell in 1907 and was soon pregnant with her first child, Julian, Woolf became much more conscious about herself having a child. In August 1907, she wrote to one of her close friends, Violet Dickinson: "Shall I ever bear a child I wonder?" (*Letters* 1: 309) After the birth of Julian in February 1908, she stopped working on her new book *Melymbrosia* (the working title for her first novel *The Voyage Out*) and wrote a biographical essay for her nephew (and also his mother), which shows the depth of an impact that Julian's birth had on Woolf's life.<sup>4</sup> As she wrote in the same year, "Nessa has all that I should like to have" (*Letters* 1: 334). Vanessa's marriage and childbirth obviously encouraged Woolf to hope the same experience.

When she married Leonard Woolf in 1912, Woolf hoped to have children in the near future, a wish that did not come true. Concerned with the poor state of her health, Leonard decided not to have any children after his consulting with the doctors.<sup>5</sup> As Quentin Bell explains, "At this time, Virginia was still cheerfully expecting to have children. Leonard already had his misgivings but I do not think that Virginia became aware of them until the beginning of 1913" (*Biography* 2: 7). Woolf's hope—"I want everything—love, children, adventure, intimacy, work" (May 1; *Letters* 1: 496)—never came true and turned into a lifelong trauma, which she would be struggle with through her writing.

### 3

*Night and Day* represents Woolf's relationship with her sister Vanessa Bell and is closely related to her trauma of childlessness. It is not a simple biographical novel but it is a process for Woolf to seek for an ideal life by fictionally modifying Vanessa's life. It is the first novel that she wrote after the decision of not having children, and Woolf admits that the novel was inspired from Vanessa. During working on the novel in 1916, she wrote to Vanessa that *Night and Day* is a novel about Vanessa's life: "I am very much interested in your life, which I think of writing another novel about. Its fatal staying with you—you start so many new ideas" (*Letters* 2: 109). Moreover, in the same letter, Woolf referred to Vanessa's children: "I greatly envy you your brat. They are very interesting. How odd it will be when Julian is a very clever, severe, undergraduate as I see he will be" (109). Woolf not only created an ideal female figure as the double of Vanessa, but also expressed her changing self, missing an absent child and exploring the feminine authorship.

The novel reflects Woolf's transformative state of mind regarding the experience of childlessness, which consequently encouraged her to undergo the spiritual growth. The protagonist, Katherine Hilbery (a double of Vanessa), and her family life embody Woolf's ambivalence about her sister's conservativeness with ambition to pursue her interest. However, the novel's Victorian setting and tra-

ditional life styles, the literary history passed on in the Hilbery family, Katherine's awkward relationship with the mother, and failure in marriage are all part of Woolf's mental conflict and are expressed in her desire to pursue a writing career. While the protagonist of *Night and Day* seems to successfully represent Vanessa's fruitful life with a career and children, the novel at the same time reveals the shadow of the ambivalence that Woolf could not conceal.

Throughout the novel, Woolf often makes literature and literary history intervene in the story. Katherine is a sensible, 27-year-old young woman, who helps her conservative middle-class Victorian parents with their social life. Despite the literary atmosphere of the family—her father is an editor of a literary journal and her mother is a granddaughter of a poet—she is not interested in literature and is secretly attracted by mathematics. Literature and literary history often appear in Katherine's life and evoke parts of Woolf herself rather than of Vanessa. Woolf describes Katherine as a typical Victorian figure with a little ambition to pursue mathematics, just like Vanessa pursued painting; however, at the same time, she feels the influence of their family history and literary background. Katherine is occasionally reminded of her literary ancestors, whom she is not very conscious of:

Katharine was unconsciously affected, each time she entered her mother's room, by all these influences, which had had their birth years ago, when she was a child, and had something sweet and solemn about them, and connected themselves with early memories of the cavernous glooms and sonorous echoes of the Abbey where her grandfather lay buried. (113).

Despite having no interest in literature, Katherine cannot avoid feeling the literary influence that is passed down through generations. By the intervention of literature, Katherine's life symbolizes not only Vanessa but also Woolf's own literary life.

Moreover, Woolf never made Katherine's mother to be as her own mother's double or a maternal role model. While Katherine's mother, Mrs. Hilbery, is described as a Victorian mother, she is also eager to preserve the literary influence of the ancestors. Mrs. Hilbery takes up the literary nature of the family and shows unsuitable motivation for literature despite the role as a Victorian hostess. With the determination to fulfill the obligation to work on the biography of her father, who was a poet, Mrs. Hilbery sometimes exposes her awkward literary nature even though she herself is not a writer and often has trouble with the literary work: "But in the spring her desire for expression invariably increased. She was haunted by the ghosts of phrases. She gave herself up to a sensual delight in the combinations of words" (304). Woolf empathetically describes the literacy aspect of the mother and dares to avoid making Mrs. Hilbery into a typical Victorian mother.

Woolf also emphasizes the connection to the past of the Hilberies, which represents Woolf's desire for a literary connection to predecessors in history. Mrs. Hilbery is proud of the family history and feels a strong connection to it. She denies that people "live exclusively in the present": "'After all, what *is* the present? Half of it's the past, and the better half, too, I should say,' she added" (14). While Mrs. Hilbery's sociability, shown in the social gatherings she hosts, seems to affirm the importance of their present life, her words ambivalently seek for the connection to past generations. Hermione Lee

points out that “[s]he[Woolf] was actually conscious of the relationship between the generations, which was filling *Night and Day*” (381). Woolf seems to cast her own connections with the literary predecessors onto the character.

Kathrine’s discontent with Mrs. Hilbery reveals the conflict within the ideal figure of Vanessa between tradition, freedom, and literature. When she helps Mrs. Hilbery to write her grandfather’s biography, Katherine is irritated with her mother, who cannot carry on the work efficiently. Katherine thinks:

She had suddenly become very angry, with a rage which their relationship made silent, and therefore doubly powerful and critical. She felt all the unfairness of the claim which her mother tacitly made to her time and sympathy, and what Mrs. Hilbery took, Katharine thought bitterly, she wasted. (117)

Katherine does not show any sympathy with her mother’s literary ambition. Woolf does not allow Katherine to have everything and describes her ambivalence regarding her mother. Shirly Panken notices the reversal of the mother-daughter power relationship: “Obviously Katherine felt manipulated by a family that reversed the role of parent and child, that thrust too much responsibility on her alone” (93). Woolf makes Katherine reject the mother-daughter relationship, which represents a balance between the traditional woman’s role and the pursuit of literature.

In fact, Katherine is not described as pursuing a conservative Victorian woman’s life after all. In this manner, Woolf justifies her own childless self and propose a new life for woman. Although Woolf regards Katherine as Vanessa, Katherine’s attitude toward marriage is different from that of Vanessa. By having Katherine break the marital engagement, Woolf questions women being in bondage to the traditional gender role. Woolf dares to describe Katherine’s marriage as the fulfillment of the gender role. Katherine talks to her fiancé, William Rodney, about their marriage:

“But for me I suppose you would recommend marriage?” said Katharine, with her eyes fixed on the moon.

“Certainly I should. Not for you only, but for all women. Why, you’re nothing at all without it; you’re only half alive; using only half your faculties; you must feel that for yourself. That is why—” Here he stopped himself, and they began to walk slowly along the Embankment, the moon fronting them. (66)

William is a typical Victorian man who believes that a young woman must experience the sequential events of marriage and bear children to lead a proper life. At last, Katherine decides not to marry William. Their disagreement in the novel represents the conflict between a married and maternal woman like Vanessa and Woolf’s quest for a writing career.

For Woolf, Katherine is not a simple record of Vanessa’s life or an admired symbol of Vanessa; through Katherine, the novel reveals Woolf’s ambivalence toward the traditional woman’s life and the writing career. It is true that Woolf admires Vanessa and her children, but she also needed to encourage herself to pursue literature and had to deny accepting a conservative Victorian life. As

Katherine Mansfield writes about *Night and Day*: “There is not a chapter where one is unconscious of the writer, of her personality, of her point of view, and her control of the situation” (108). By writing about Vanessa and reflecting about herself, in *Night and Day* Woolf represents a path for herself to follow.

#### 4

Writing *Night and Day* offered Virginia Woolf change and growth. While Woolf had a serious mental breakdown in 1914 after completing her previous novel, *The Voyage Out*, after the completion of *Night and Day* she spent the following decades without any serious attack.<sup>6</sup> Woolf wrote the novel to express her feelings about Vanessa and her motherhood, and the process eventually encouraged her to reflect about herself and to start establishing her career as a writer. She wrote in March 1919, just after the completion of *Night and Day*:

In my opinion N. & D. [Night and Day] is a much more mature & finished & satisfactory book than *The Voyage Out*; . . . I don't suppose I've ever enjoyed any writing so much as I did the last half of N. & D. Indeed, no part of it taxed me as *The Voyage Out* did . . . (*Diary* 1: 259)

She shows clear satisfaction with writing the novel.

In fact, writing *Night and Day* caused her to change. In 1911, she had written “[t]o be 29 and unmarried—to be a failure—childless—insane too, no writer” (*Letters* 1: 466), which shows that she was then thinking about marriage and children. However, with the completion of the novel, Woolf seems to begin perceiving life differently. Lee notices Woolf's concern about her aging in her diary entries between 1918 and 1919:

There is a great deal about age in these private writings of a woman in her mid-thirties. She anticipates herself as an ‘elderly’ lady of fifty, rereading her diaries ‘for her memoirs,’ a fantasy (which she often returns to, making her imaginary older self a little older each time) which partly made her thirty-seven birthday ‘robbed of some of the terrors.’ (380)

Imagining getting older and accepting the reality, Woolf gradually overcame the fear of a life without children.

Furthermore, in that same period that Woolf started some new relationships. As Bell mentions, “November 1918, which brought the armistice, brought also the end of *Night and Day*—the last words were written on 21 November; it also brought Virginia a new friend, T. S. Eliot” (*Biography* 2: 63). Gathering at the Hogarth Press, she deepened the friendships with other writers, including T. S. Eliot and Katherine Mansfield. In addition, Leonard established the 1917 club for social meetings, which Woolf joined as one of the writers. Bell describes the club as follows:

It was the writers who seemed to be just within sight of new possibilities. Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Katherine Mansfield were beginning to be read and discussed; and Roger Fry came back from France with news of an undoubted literary genius . . . (*Biography*

2: 48)

Woolf wrote about these life changes in her diary on October 12, 1918: “It’s strange how whole group of people suddenly swim completely into one’s life. This group to which Gertler & Mary H. are attached was unknown to me a year ago. I surveyed them with considerable, almost disquieting calm” (*Diary 1*: 202).

After the completion of *Night and Day*, Woolf obtained the chance to think about her life as a woman and to start a new life as a writer. Woolf’s changes can be explained in terms of “relating to others” and “new possibilities,” which Tedeschi and his colleagues have referred to, and can be interpreted as a result of her spiritual growths.

## 5

Woolf wrote *Night and Day* just after she went through the traumatic experience of giving up on having children. Woolf’s literary and personal events in the early 1900s—her decision not to have children, her relationship with Vanessa and her children, and writing the novel, as well as the following changes shown in her life, thoughts, and relationships—follow the process of posttraumatic growth. She wrote about the relationship between her mind and writing on October 25, 1920:

Melancholy diminishes as I write. Why then don’t I write it down oftener? Well, one’s vanity forbids. I want to appear a success even to myself. Yet I don’t get to the bottom of it. Its having no children, living away from friends, failing to write well, spending too much on food, growing old. (*Diary 2*: 72)

For Woolf, writing is a comfort, a means of transforming into the more mature self. Likewise, Robert A. Neimeyer insists that our sense of self is established through telling stories:

. . . identity can be seen as a narrative achievement, as our sense of self is established through the stories that we tell about ourselves, the stories that relevant others tell about us, and the stories we enact in their presence. Importantly, it is this very self-narrative that is profoundly shaken by “seismic” life events, instigating the process of revision, repair, or replacement of basic thematic assumptions and goals. . . . (70)

Storytelling enables those who experience traumatic events to cope with them and renew themselves; subsequently, the story itself contributes to the history of posttraumatic growth. *Night and Day* is a product of Woolf’s complex feeling about the traditional life for a woman, about having children, and about her aspiration to become a writer as a process of re-thinking her life.

Writing *Night and Day* constitutes the early stages of Woolf’s attempts to liberate herself from her childlessness: in the process, she produced a rich novel. For Virginia Woolf, writing was a means of coping with her struggles—writing enabled her to undergo a constant process of change and self-growth both as an author and as a woman.

## Notes

1. This paper is a revised version of my original research paper presented at the seasonal regular meeting of the Virginia Woolf Society of Japan (Kyoto) on March 28, 2015.
2. Tedeschi and Calhoun distinguish “trauma” from one that American Psychiatric Association’s definition that is closely connected to personal experiences involving death or serious injury (see American Psychiatric Association 463).
3. Woolf’s parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, had seven children in the family, including the ones from their previous marriages: three from the Stephens, three from the Duckworths, and one from the Thackerays (for more details on the origin and structure of the Stephen family, see Bell vol. 1: 10–14, 16–18, and 22).
4. King explains that “[a]t the time Julian Bell was born on 4 February 1908, Virginia was struggling to bring her first novel, *Melymbrosia*, to life. She put this aside to write for her nephew a biography (*Reminiscences*) of his mother” (132).
5. According to his autobiography, Leonard Woolf met Sir George Savage, Maurice Craig, and T. B. Hyslop, all of who confirmed Leonard’s fear that childbearing would threaten Virginia’s health, and decided to follow their advice to not have any children (see Leonard Woolf 82).
6. Virginia Woolf had been suffering from mental illness since her had the first breakdown after her mother’s death in 1895. According to Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf did not have any serious mental breakdowns after the one in 1914 until she drowned herself in 1940 (see 75–77).

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