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# Virginia Woolf: The Novel as a Work of Art

An Analysis of *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*

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## **Shortened Titles**

- BA Woolf, Virginia, (*The Years and*) *Between the Acts* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2012)
- CE Woolf, Virginia, *Collected Essays*, 4 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966)\*
- CSF Woolf, Virginia, *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Dick, Susan, ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985)
- D Woolf, Virginia, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols, ed. A. O. Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981-5, vols I, II, IV and V; London: Hogarth Press, 1980, vol. III)\*
- L Woolf, Virginia, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, ed. N. Nicolson and J. Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1975-80)\*
- TM Woolf, Virginia, *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964)
- TTL Woolf, Virginia, *To The Lighthouse* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2002)

\* Multivolume books are quoted in the text with the abbreviation followed by the number of the volume.

'We have, when reading it, the pleasure of inhabiting two  
worlds at once, a pleasure only art can give'

(E. M. Forster, 'Virginia Woolf', 1942: 13)

## Introduction

Virginia Woolf is known as a Modernist writer. She was definitely very influential in the early 1900s and had an important role in the context of Modernist literature. Her work was (and still is) appreciated because of its departure from the traditional, substantially descriptive novel in the late nineteenth-century realistic mode, and thus for its innovative and experimental writing style. In her essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924) Woolf explains her moving away from traditional fiction, as well as the aim that writers should pursue from that moment on. Edwardian writers 'have developed a technique of novel-writing, which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions, which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death' (Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', CE I: 330), as she wrote.

The early twentieth century witnessed a relevant change in the arts and their interactions. Writers, critics and intellectuals of all kinds revisited and reviewed the relationship between the verbal and the visual in different terms, which allowed artists a new way of expressing life and of presenting their characters. The age in which Woolf lived definitely saw a cultural scene where visual artists and writers did not only influence each other's works and theories, but they also worked together.

The final decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century brought about major innovations in many branches of everyday life. Revolutionary scientific, technological, social and cultural changes took place in those years, leading to a modified view of the surrounding world, which artists had to represent. Artists, in fact, faced the difficulty of having to portray a different reality than before. However, they tried to do it by using traditional means that were not suitable to describe the new life and the new world anymore.

One can say that 'Modernism's roots lie deep in the transformations brought by industrialization' (Bradshaw, 2006: 245), as David Bradshaw claims. Innovations in all fields definitely altered the traditional world and its perception. The new means of communication and of transportation (such as the telephone, the radio, or bicycles and cars), as well as new materials calling for new, unconventional architecture, contributed to modify both time and space. Such innovations, though, were not only material, they were also followed by cultural and intellectual developments. Classical science, for instance, was undermined by new theories that proved the existence of a different world hitherto unknown or unheard of. An example is Henry Bergson's idea of 'real duration' (*la durée*), which threatened the standard notion of time and chronology. In fact, he viewed the experience of time as individual, thus filtered through one's consciousness, rather than as a linear succession of collective moments.

Psychological theories also contributed to change the modern perception of reality. Very influential for modern artists were, for instance, William James's writings (1890), according to which reality was thought of as a subjective, rather than an external element. Indeed, among the changes in the early twentieth century a 'shift in the metaphysics of space and time that pervaded scientific, philosophical and cultural discourse' spread rapidly across 'the broader popular imagination' and posed 'questions about the nature of the universe and the human subject within it' (Parsons, 2007: 131).

Writers were definitely aware of the changes brought about by modernity and felt that they too needed to be modern 'in literary style as well as in life, and a developed perception that the modern world was, in important ways, unlike what had come before' (Shiach, 2007: 2) became a common concern among them. Indeed, in Morag Shiach's *Companion to the Modernist Novel* we find out that an obsession with how reality and aesthetic form relate is peculiar to the modernist novel. '[W]hat is reality? And who are the judges of reality?' wondered Virginia Woolf in 1924 in an essay published in the literary

journal *Criterion* (Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', CE I: 325). 'Is life like this? Must novels be like this?' (Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', CE II: 106) she asked later on in 'Modern Fiction' (1921). 'Have I the power of creating the true reality?' Woolf wondered again in her diary (Woolf, D II: 248).

The early 1900s were indeed momentous in the history of the English novel. Literary debates constantly discussed the status of the novel and its future, but they were also concerned with its form, thus with how the novel should relate and respond to modern life. The novel has, since its origins, aimed at representing everyday life. However, its scope changed from producing an imitation and equivalent of life, to introducing psychological elements. The origins of this modernising impulse can be found in the writers Gustave Flaubert and Henry James in the second half of the nineteenth century. Flaubert was certainly among the first writers who dedicated a large portion of his fiction to recording the inner life of his characters in *Madame Bovary* (1852), he thus presented an interest in the human mind as a novelistic element. Whereas Henry James acknowledged that 'a novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value' (James, 1948: 8) in his essay 'The Art of Fiction' (1884).

Many young writers of the early twentieth century felt that the novel was stuck within fixed and restrictive rules. Even though they were born in the Victorian era, theirs was a generation that had grown among revolutionary innovations in various fields and they felt that conventional modes of representation could not render the new age. 'On all sides writers are attempting what they cannot achieve, forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it' (Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', CE II: 218), observed Woolf. The younger generation of writers, therefore, tried to reshape traditional conventions and to find a form that would be appropriate to express their contemporary reality. In fact, already in 1863 Charles Baudelaire talked about modern writers in his essay 'Painter of Modern Life' (1863), claiming that the artist 'walking or quickening his pace, he goes his way, for ever in search. In



search of what? [...] He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity', for want of a better term to express the idea in question' (Baudelaire, quoted in Meyers, 1975: 1).

The literature of the 1900s was beginning to explore its conventions and, in doing so, it followed the experimentations of the visual arts and its achievements. As Savina Stevanato claims, '[a]n epoch-changing revolution was in progress, and art had a role to play' (Stevanato, 2012: 39). Indeed there was a strong bond between the visual and the written crafts: they influenced and borrowed from each other but they also compared their stylistic devices, both experimented with their own theoretical and practical conventions but also with aesthetics from the other craft, artists of any kind could meet in private or in public events, and exhibitions were abundant.

Writers adopted the visual at the service of their writing and took painterly techniques as example and model for viewing and perceiving the surrounding environment. As Stevanato claims, it is Impressionism that 'inaugurated the change' (Stevanato, 2012: 36). The critic Jesse Matz too argues that 'Impressionism is a fundamental antecedent to literary modernism' (Bradshaw and Dettmar, 2006: 206), the infamous movement that characterises the early twentieth century literature and arts.

An instance of Impressionist influence in literature can be read in Joseph Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), which critics have frequently viewed as a manifesto of modernist writing:

art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence. [...] Such an appeal, to be effective, must be an impression conveyed through the senses. [...] My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make

you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see  
(Conrad, 1921: vii-x).

The innovative techniques adopted by modern writers were certainly also adopted by visual artists. Indeed there was an exchange between the arts that made Modernist techniques of representation possible; as Freeman notices, the ‘challenges of recording detail and conveying experience occupied alike the avant-garde’ (Freeman, 2007: 138). Whether it was visual or verbal arts, artists and intellectuals between the *fin de siècle* and the twentieth century wanted to find the best technique for rendering modern times, for representing ‘life in all its immediacy and multiplicity’ (Parsons, 2007: 48). The visual and the written arts were closer than ever before in the twentieth century and great artworks were produced by such a relationship and cooperation.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the two arts has not always been a positive one. The verbal and visual arts were not perceived as having equal values in the past, but rather one of them was preferred at various times in history. In fact, long and varied debates throughout the centuries resulted in an on-going competition between painting and literature, each trying to conquer their otherness, as well as to win the role of supreme craft.

The long-debated issue of the sisterhood between the arts goes back to Classical antiquity, when literary pieces that derived from the plastic arts started to be written. Early examples of how variously the concept of imitation was interpreted are Horace’s notion of *ut pictura poesis*; Simonide of Ceos’ remark, as reported by Plutarch, that ‘painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture’ (Horace, quoted in Bradshaw, 2006: 206); Plato’s comparison of painting and poetry, based on their common mimetic nature; as well as Aristotle’s comparison, defining the two as ‘cousins’ rather than ‘sisters’.

The Middle Ages, with its review of the classical concept of imitation, ascribing to it a metaphysical value, other than a purely descriptive one. The primacy of painting was affirmed during the Italian Renaissance, when ancient

texts and pictorialism were rediscovered. Such supremacy was due to the belief that words could not resemble real things as well as images did, therefore, words and written works were believed to be less real than paintings. Only with the Baroque merging of the arts, was the supremacy of the visual code questioned. Then, from Romanticism to the Modern age the relation between oral and visual codes kept shifting.

A turning point in the conception of the two codes was the interart enquiry made by Victorian Pre-Raphaelitism, from which a loss of 'mimetic confidence' and a 'crisis of referentiality' emerged. The consequence of such feelings was a change in the relationships of the arts. Its new redefinition was the catalyst for seeing such relationship under a new light; in fact, new interart perspectives led 'towards abstraction, subjectivity and self-reflexivity, on the brink of Modernism' (Stevanato, 2012: 9).

The Modern age and its transformations did not only affect interart relationships, but they also allowed intellectuals to revisit and, thus, view the arts and their relationships in new terms.

Indeed, Virginia Woolf was concerned with various artistic branches in her studies; in her private or essayistic writing we certainly read about music, architecture, images and poems. However, as critics and intellectuals did before her, she focused mostly in the relationship between painting and poetry. Woolf often examined how various arts differed and complemented each other. The writer's investigation on the topic both stimulated and tormented her 'for more than twenty years' (Mares, 1989: 327). She analysed the relationship between the visual and the written, starting at a young age, within her family environment. Virginia was constantly surrounded by critics, writers, artists and philosophers, therefore she could confront and discuss her ideas with those of intellectuals. Very influential to her were the relationships with other artistic personalities, such as, for instance, the art critic Roger Fry, but also her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell.

Woolf had mixed feelings about interart relationships: she sometimes despised visual artists, whereas she admired them at other times, as it becomes clear when reading her diaries or the letters that she exchanged with fellow artists. Indeed, Woolf did not value the work of painters at first; only later on in her life did she learn how to view, understand and appreciate them. Notwithstanding this troubled relationship with painting, her written works display a great painterly ability on behalf of Woolf. Virginia's skills in using words allowed her to produce an enormous quantity of visual impressions; she experimented with visuality, and she was, indeed, constantly 'reframing the visible world in her image texts - texts which display a remarkable concern for visual themes and images' (Humm, 2002: 3). The readers have the pleasure of reading her literary 'paintings' not only in her novels, but also in her essays and short stories.

There has been much debate about her artistic style and whether she may be considered as an Impressionist or a Post-Impressionist. The two movements, indeed, followed each other and had elements in common - such as the main themes and motifs -, however the aim of the two differed. Whereas the artists belonging to the former movement tried to reproduce an impression on canvas, those of the latter aimed at making their canvas express an emotion by using colour and light.

'When we turn to Woolf's criticism of the novel with her background in the visual arts in mind, the role the Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Modern art vocabulary played in helping her to formulate ideas about fiction becomes apparent' (Torgovnick, 1985: 64), as, for instance, Marianna Torgovnick notices.

This thesis will present Virginia Woolf not as a writer but as a visual artist and a literary 'painter'. Indeed, this study attempts at analysing the influence of visual arts and artists - focusing on the Impressionist movement - in Virginia Woolf's writing. Starting off by looking at her private writings and

her intimate artistic relationships, we will then look at some of her published fiction. A comparison between Woolf's written pieces with the themes of Impressionist art, as well as with some artworks painted by Impressionist artists, will be achieved, in order to discover how the writer transferred painterly elements and aesthetics from canvas into her novels.

Introducing the themes of Impressionism by analysing what has been defined as Virginia's Impressionist short story, 'Kew Gardens' (1919), the analogy between Impressionist motifs on the canvas and on the page will be further examined by looking at her earlier novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and the later *Between the Acts* (1941).

In chapter 6, the function of Woolf's written visuality in the two novels will be explored from a different point of view. In fact, Virginia Woolf, being a writer, differentiated herself from visual artists, insofar as she was interested not only in the external appearances, but in the inner workings of the mind as well. Visual devices are, therefore, both motifs of Impressionist canvases and a way of exploring the moods and sensations of the characters in the novels.

In perfect Modernist flair, Woolf certainly focused her fiction around the conscience of the characters within the texts. However, it is through the visual arts that she manages to create her own writing style and to achieve the representation of modern reality.

## 1. The relationship between the arts: the visual and the verbal fight for primacy

Writing and painting as we know them are two different crafts. However, the two mediums communicate and sometimes merge in modern artworks. The nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire, indeed, wrote: '[a] characteristic symptom of the spiritual condition of our century is that all the arts tend, if not to act as a substitute for each other, at least to supplement each other, by lending each other new strength and new resources' (Baudelaire, quoted in Meyers, 1975: 1). 'The writers and painters often understood or emulated, both theoretically and practically, what their cohorts were undertaking' (Torgovnick, 1985: 3). For instance, the French writer Emile Zola was an early supporter of Impressionism, which is apparent in the analogy between the subjects of his novels and those of paintings.

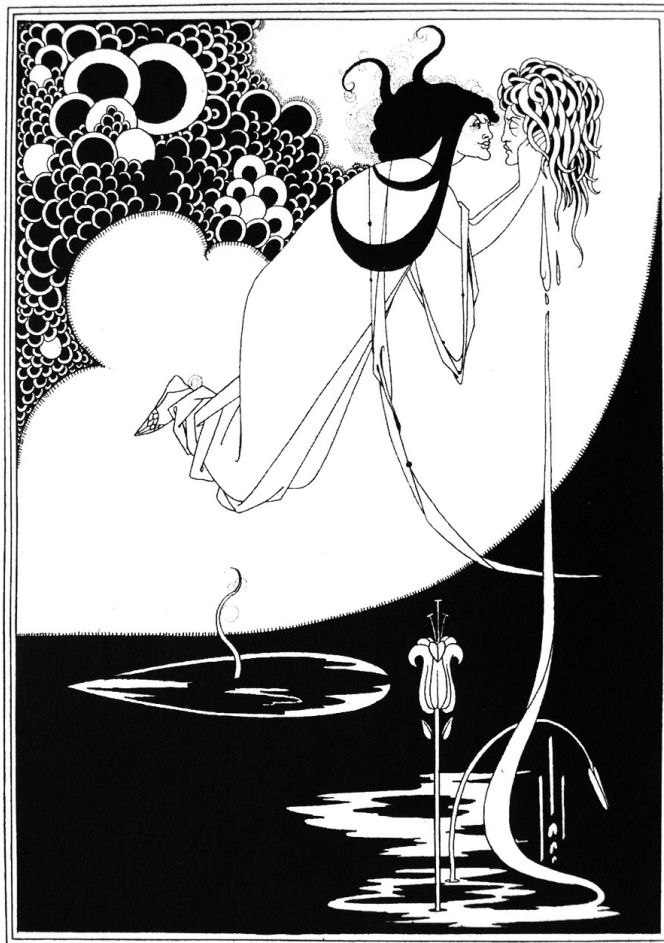


Image 1: Beardsley,  
*The Climax*, 1893

Leading artists both in France and in England did book illustrations and covers as well; personalities like Turner, Burne-Jones, Beardsley, Delacroix, Manet and Virginia's sister, Vanessa Bell, among others, are worth being mentioned (images 1, 2 and 3). Literary contents also became painterly subjects, since artists happened to paint out of novel material. Indeed, when reading Balzac, Henry James commented that '[t]o the art of brush the novel must return' (James and James, 1972: 188).

However, the analogy and cooperation of the visual and verbal arts –but also among various other arts - is not only characteristic of recent times. In fact, the comparison between the different arts is a topic as old as time. The most important comparison in time, though, has been that between painting and writing. Painters, poets, critics, philosophers and historians have all identified analogies between the two, each serving their own purpose. In fact, the two crafts have not always been considered equally important in history, but one was believed the superior art at times.

The first contribution to the discussion on literary pictorialism dates back to Classical antiquity, when painting and poetry were frequently associated: 'The poet is like a painter' wrote Plato; Aristotle frequently referred to poetry as 'the same as painting' in his *Poetics*; whereas Horace claimed 'ut pictura poesis' – translating 'as a painting, so a poem' -, the phrase that was to become a motto in later centuries. These personalities did not, however, formulate theories on the matter, but they rather provided suggestions.

Plato compared illusionistic painting and poetry, focusing on the concept of mimesis, and thus on the production of images as opposed to the production of reality. He did not entirely appreciate either painting or poetry, since he believed that both mixed falsehood in their reproduction of reality. In his rejection of both crafts, Plato provided an early association of the two.

Aristotle, instead, identified definite areas, in which the arts can be or cannot be compared. He began his *Poetics* by naming a quality that differentiates the verbal and visual arts and then followed with four analogies between them. The fact that each craft employs different 'means of imitation' - which give them a different expressive force - makes the verbal and visual arts 'cousins' rather than 'sisters', he believed. However, the similarity becomes clear when considering the objects of imitation and the subjects treated by both. The analogy he drew was connected to the images and ideas, rather than being based on the techniques of representation of the two.

Neither of these philosophers, however, delivered comparisons of great importance; it was Horace who wrote a phrase that was to last until our time. In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace noticed how some poems only please at their first reading, whereas others can be read and appreciated repeatedly. So it happens with painting, he wrote, adding that whereas some paintings please at a distance and in the shadow, others have an impact even when looked at multiple times and in the light of day.

In order to find an analogy between the arts, the three philosophers mentioned the concept of imitation, which was interpreted differently by each. It is Horace's idea of imitation as rendition of life and nature that is relevant, since it gives painting the supremacy. In fact, it was painting that could better attain a vivid representation of reality, he believed, and therefore poetry must resemble the supreme visual art. This concept - that was a widespread notion in late Roman and Greek antiquity - will be adopted by critics and artists in later centuries.

The idea that painting is superior to poetry was also shared by the Greek biographer Plutarch. He believed that 'imitation' connected reality and art, and that the relationship between the two was more prominent in painting. Nevertheless, he still drew interart comparisons. When commenting upon a description of an expedition written by Thucydides, for instance, Plutarch



wrote that '[s]uch a description is characterized by pictorial vividness both in its arrangement and in its power of description' (Plutarch, 1936: 501).

'The skill to create set descriptions, intended to bring visual reality before the mind's eye by means of words, was taught in the schools', maintains Hagstrum when analysing the writing of prose in ancient Roman times. Pictorialism was, indeed, 'bred in the very bone of the Roman boy. The ability to achieve it he assiduously cultivated, and he fully prepared to admire it in the work of others' (Hagstrum, 1958: 29), adds Hagstrum in her study upon *The Sister Arts*.

Although we can now read texts written by ancient personalities, such as those mentioned before, there isn't much evidence of pictorial influences upon literature of the time, and it is therefore difficult to understand how productive the interart relationship was. Instances, however, can be found in the statue created by Phidias that was inspired by some verses of the *Iliad*, as well as in the frescoes in Pompeii and Herculaneum recalling passages in Homer's writing, or in the landscape paintings inspired by the *Odyssey* that were discovered in 1848 in a Roman house.

The more influential instances of pictorialism in prose appear in late antiquity and can be read in the works of Philostratus and Callistratus, which present vast celebrations and descriptions of either real or imaginary paintings. The influence of the verbal and the visual was mutual, even though philosophers identified painting as being superior. Such an abundant and varied production of literary pictorialism in antiquity set the ground for developments in the future. In fact, classical pictorialism persisted in the succeeding centuries and it is to be found in Medieval literature. Franciscus Junius in 1637 referenced to Cicero and Christian Tertullian as supporters of the concept of 'ut pictura poesis': '[f]or all arts that belong to humanity possess a kind of common connection; they are bound together as though by a blood relationship' (Cicero, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 37), acknowledged Cicero,

whereas Tertullian said that '[t]here is no art which is not either the mother or a very close kinsman of another art' (Tertullian, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 37).

The Middle Ages definitely appropriated classical pictorialism, yet they adapted it to their needs. Whereas in the earlier Classical era artists focused on representing nature and reality, in the era ruled by Christianity, art was perceived as unrealistic and it was infused with Christian imagery. Since the art of the Middle Ages was not concerned with the representation of reality, the analogy between the verbal and visual forms of art was no longer drawn upon the concept of mimesis and on their truth to nature.

For Thomas Aquinas nature indeed meant an 'allegorical embodiment that reveals meaning' (Hagstrum, 1958: 46), as opposed to meaning 'vivid lifelikeness', as it did for Plutarch. Medieval art certainly stemmed from the mind, rather than from the eye. Dante, for instance, claimed that 'art exists in three stages: in the mind of the artist, in his instrument, and in the material formed by art' (Dante, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 46); none of the crucial stages of art appears to be involved with nature or reality. Since truth was believed to have been planted within the mind of the artist by god, it is what belongs to the inner form and the spiritual that took precedence.

The main difference between antiquity and the Middle Ages was marked by a distinction in how the connection between art and reality was perceived; it is such differentiation in perception that influenced the comparison between painting and poetry in the viewpoint of intellectuals. However, the Renaissance making its appearance first in Italy and then in England brought again a change in how interart connections were perceived. The century was characterised by the rediscovery of ancient pictorialist tradition and models, as well as of ancient texts. The tradition of 'poetry as painting' - 'ut pictura poesis' - was therefore revived.

Petrarch called Homer a 'painter': 'primo pintor delle memorie antiche' (Petrarch, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 57). Leon Battista Alberti claimed that

writers and painters have 'many ideas and ornaments in common' (Hagstrum, 1958: 57), mentioning Lucian's description of Apelles' allegorical painting 'Calumny' (a passage which inspired Botticelli's painting on the subject at the Uffizi) and remembering that Phidias was inspired to create his famous Zeus by reading Homer (Alberti, 1950: 103-5). Julius Caesar Scaliger said that 'every oration consists of image, idea, and imitation, just like painting' (Scaliger, 1617: 401). Whereas Pomponius Gauricus maintained that '[p]oetry ought to resemble painting' (Gauricus, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 61) in 1541.

Simonides of Ceos' ancient remark was variously adopted by critics of the Renaissance as well. In Italy it was interpreted through Leonardo's definition of the arts, which explains that: '[p]ainting is poetry which is seen and not heard, and poetry is a painting which is heard but not seen. These two arts (you may call them both either poetry or painting) have here interchanged the senses by which they penetrate to the intellect' (Leonardo, quoted in Sypher, 1955: 98). Whereas in England Simonides' remark itself appeared in a translation by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1586: '[f]or as Simonides saide: Painting is a dumme Poesie, and Poesie is a speaking picture; and the actions which the Painters set out with visible colours and figures the Poets reckon with wordes, as though they had in deede been perfourmed' (Smith, I, 1904: 342).

Hagstrum in her study upon the *Sister Arts* notices how the two crafts have been compared in the previous centuries as for their subjects and ways of representation. The term 'imitation', she writes,

had bound the verbal and graphic arts together in antiquity but had been replaced in official medieval philosophy by the new similitude between the work of art and unseen, unseeable reality, became in the Renaissance a crucially important term of critical meaning [...] in the more literal sense of late antiquity (Hagstrum, 1958: 65).

The 'ut pictura poesis' concept was extremely influential for the epoch, so much so that it was even defined as 'almost the keynote of Renaissance criticism' (Spingarn, 1920: 42). Its influence, however, mainly served a return to

naturalism in the arts and painting became again the exemplary art, since it was capable of achieving a close contact with reality.

Boccaccio's 'defense of poetry' shows how poets tried to convey through words the perception of the visible world, that which can be seen in pictures:

The epithet [ape of nature] might be less irritating [than ape of philosophers], since the poet tries all his powers to set forth in noble verse the effects, either of Nature herself, or of her eternal and unalterable operation [...] the forms, the habits, discourse, and actions of all inanimate things, the courses of heaven and the stars, the shattering force of the winds, the roar and crackling of flames, the thunder of the waves, high mountains and shady groves, and rivers in their course [...] so vividly set forth that the very objects will seem actually present in [...] the written poem (Boccaccio, quoted in Gilbert and Kuhn, 1939: 180-81).

His comment also recalls Leonardo's explanation of the powers of a painter, to whom, he believed, the noblest of the senses – that is sight – belongs. These similar theories further associate the relationship between poets and painters.

Poets certainly competed with painters during the Renaissance. In Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, for instance, we read: '[a]rt a painter? Canst paint me a tear, or a wound, a groan or a sigh?' (Kyd, 1996: 139). Indeed, the works of Tintoretto and Giotto increased the prestige of the visual art, but they did not lower that of the verbal one. Painters definitely looked at poetry both for inspiration and themes, as Lodovico Dolce claimed: '[i]f painters wish to find, without travail, a perfect example of a beautiful woman, let them read those verses of Ariosto in which he marvellously describes the beauty of the enchantress Alcina' (Ciampoli, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 71).

However, painting remained the preferred way of reproducing nature. The supremacy of painting during the Renaissance was supported by its association with science. Science, as well as painting, would observe, reproduce and explain nature. Painters dealing with things were, therefore, believed to be superior to writers, who dealt with words. 'No other art could surpass painting

in obeying the ancient command to imitate nature' (Hagstrum, 1958: 69); poets were once again urged to look at painting and take the art as a model.

Whereas the Renaissance era witnessed an artistic focus on nature, the Baroque century 'desired the union of sense and thought in art' (Hagstrum, 1958: 94). The association between painting and poetry seemed stronger in the seventeenth century than in previous epochs; Robert Woseley in 1685 indeed said that '[t]here are no two things in the World that have a nearer affinity and resemblance than Poetry and Painting' (Spingarn, III, 1909: 16).

In the Baroque era a strong attention was given to the association of the arts, since it was believed that, when associated, the two arts could achieve a 'desirable fusion of the sensuous and the intellectual' (Hagstrum, 1958: 94). Giambattista Marino - who is considered to represent the theories of the century - discussed the relation between the arts by quoting and reinterpreting Simonides' proverb:

The latter [poetry] is silent in the former [painting]; and the former speaks in the latter, from whence it happens that, occasionally exchanging with one another the quality proper to each, poetry is said to paint and painting to describe. Both are dedicated to the same end, that is, to nourish pleasingly the human spirit with the highest pleasure to console it. Nor is there any other difference between them than this, that one imitates with colors, the other with words; that one imitates chiefly the external, that is the features of the body, the other the internal, that is, the affections of the soul. One causes us almost to understand with the senses, the other to feel with the intellect (Marino, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 94).

Marino also added a new element to the theories of the century, as opposed to previous ones, that is the notion that arts exchange their qualities with each other when uniting: 'scambiandosi alle volte reciprocamente la proprietà delle voci' (Marino, quoted in Hagstrum, 1958: 97). According to this assumption, the verbal art would acquire a special excellence by adopting the traits of her sister.

A relevant element in the artistic analogy during the Baroque era was religious purpose. Indeed, the aim of any art form turned from accomplishing aesthetic pleasure to accomplishing political and religious commitment. The form and means of expression lost its significance, whereas the experience that the artwork produced became the focus of the artists. Whereas a Renaissance painting could be defined as 'autotelic', whose only aim was to please the eye, a Baroque painting invited the viewer to look beyond, to another reality. The response to the artwork is what really mattered in the seventeenth century, an era in which the arts were associated like never before. It was not only the duty of the writer to represent the internal, but both Baroque writers and painters were capable of revealing the moral and the religious, each using their means. For Milton, for instance, 'the pictorial was a gate that opened not primarily upon visible nature but upon transcendent and invisible reality' (Hagstrum, 1958: 128):

Beyond compare the Son of God was seen  
Most glorious, in him all his Father shon  
Substantially express'd, and in his face  
Divine compassion visibly appeared [Milton, III, 1877: 138-41]

The art of making verbal pictures has undergone numerous variations in history, two of which were extremely antithetical: one of them is the concept of lifelike vividness, that is linked to the naturalism of antiquity and the Renaissance; whereas the other was likely to remove the pictorial from external and natural elements and to rather relate it with internal and supernatural ones and is characteristic of the Medieval and Baroque centuries.

English Neoclassicism followed the Baroque century and revolted against its artistic conceptions, which were perceived as unnatural. The arts in the eighteenth century were again looking outwards, like in antiquity and in the Renaissance. Plutarch, Cicero and the humanists, as well as the models of Renaissance art, were very influential as for the aesthetics of naturalism and

realism in the century. English Enlightenment also affected pictorial imagery with its rules.

Neoclassical painters and poets were bound by an unprecedented intimate relationship – one that we could describe as ‘friendly emulation’ (Nourse, 1758: 95). ‘The eighteenth century saw the culmination of the literary man’s increasing sophistication in the visual arts’ (Hagstrum, 1958: 130); poets, indeed, possessed numerous prints, they read theories and criticism of the graphic arts and could understand paintings like never before. It was an epoch in which private collections increased, together with the diffusion of prints; treaties on art became more and more widespread; also travels abroad became popular, and produced and spread many manuals and guidebooks; and the English school of painting was acquiring more independence. All of this set the scene for the development of the visual arts.

Furthermore, the old habit of employing pictorial words and expressions to the criticism of poetry became extremely widespread in the eighteenth century. James Boswell, indeed, defined his *Life of Johnson* a ‘Flemish picture’ of a friend; Lord Chesterfield wanted his son to read Ariosto because ‘his painting is excellent’; Thomas Gray commented upon Shakespeare’s work saying that ‘every word in him is a picture’; whereas Joseph Warton, when commenting upon John Dryden’s first song for St. Cecilia’s day, said that ‘the painter has nothing to do, but to substitute colours for words, the design being finished to his hands’ (Warton, I, 1806: 51-52). Both poets and critics were living by the rule of ‘ut pictura poesis’ once again.

The abbé Batteux in 1746 published *Les beaux arts réduits à un principe*, claiming that the one principle that the arts should follow is to take nature as their model – ‘[l]a Nature [...] voilà le prototype ou le modèle des Arts’<sup>1</sup> (Batteux, I, 1774: 33). Poetry, he wrote, must contain ‘une image artificielle, un tableau, don’t le vrai et unique mérite consiste dans le bon choix, la disposition,

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<sup>1</sup> nature .. voilà, the prototype or model of the arts.

<sup>2</sup> an artificial image, a tableaux, whose true and unique merit consists in the good choice, the

la resemblance: *ut Pictura Poesis*<sup>2</sup> (Batteux, I, 1774: 329). Since the arts in the Neoclassical era followed the same ideas and rendered the same reality, any comment could be applicable to both painting and poetry.

In the eighteenth century, however, with the introduction of new psychological theories, as well as those by John Locke and Joseph Addison, the conception of how artists perceived and represented nature changed. Rather than focusing on the work, artistic practices would focus on the mind. The '*ut pictura poesis*' in the Neoclassical era was achieved differently, thus by making the reader 'see' an image in response to a verbal stimulus, whereas painterly details on the canvas could evoke a train of sensations.

Literary pictorialism at its highest was, however, challenged by rationalist thinkers. Edmund Burke's and then Gotthold Lessing's debates against the analogy between visual and verbal – leading to the disappearance of '*ut pictura poesis*' -, prepared the ground for the discussion that was to continue in later decades.

A forerunner of Lessing was Burke with his theory of the sublime. He believed language to be a social, rather than a natural, sign and it could not, therefore, bring images of natural vision. Words, Burke claimed, have a greater emotional impact when separated from visuality:

So little does poetry depend for its effect on the power of raising sensible images, that I am convinced it would lose a very considerable part of its energy, if this were the necessary result of all description. Because that union of affecting words, which is the most powerful of all poetical instruments, would frequently lose its force, along with its propriety and consistency, if the sensible images were always excited (Burke, I, 1876: 175-76).

He definitely separated words and images, since the former had the duty of creating emotional response, and the latter that of bringing the elements of nature to the eye.

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<sup>2</sup> an artificial image, a tableaux, whose true and unique merit consists in the good choice, the arrangement, the similarity: *ut Pictura Poesis*.



Lessing discussed the arts in his *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* in 1766. 'The first who compared painting with poetry was a man of fine feeling, who was conscious of a similar effect produced on himself by both arts'. Nonetheless, he observed how poems and painting were perceived differently by the human eye. Indeed, according to him, the visual arts belonged to the spatial dimension, whereas the verbal arts belonged to the temporal one – that is, literature seems to be perceived as a sequence of words that progress in time. 'Painting and poetry', he claimed, 'make use of entirely different media of expression, or signs – the first, namely of form and colour in space, the second, of articulated sounds in time'; thus 'succession of time is the department of the poet, as space is that of the painter' (Lessing, 1853: 101-120).

Lessing, indeed, acknowledged an artistic condition where painting had become too literary and poetry too pictorial, and he criticised it. He thought that the visual and plastic arts were expected to portray only the beauty of physical form, without expressing what was inside the mind and the heart. In fact, every art ought to live happily within their boundaries. Laocoon's theories, however, have been challenged in the subsequent centuries not only by literary figures and critics, but also by scientists and their psychological findings.

Starting from a contemporary of Lessing, the German writer and philosopher Friedrich Schiller viewed the contemplation of art under a new perspective. Indeed, he examined artworks in terms of the final effect upon the observer, rather than on their characteristic form. In his collection of letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* we read that:

It is an inevitable and natural consequence of their approach to perfection that the various arts, without any displacement of their objective frontiers, tend to become ever more like each other in their effect upon the psyche. [...] Poetry, when most fully developed, must grip us powerfully as music does, but at the same time, like the plastic arts, surround us with a serene clarity. This, precisely, is the mark of a perfect style in each and every art: that it is able to remove the specific limitations of the art in question without thereby destroying its specific qualities, and

through a wise use of its individual peculiarities, is able to confer upon it a more general character (Schiller, 1967: 156).

By focusing on their final effect upon spectators, he emphasised the similarities, rather than the differences, between the various crafts.

Twentieth-century cognitive psychologists too would focus on the effect of the arts upon the viewer. Thus proving Lessing's theory wrong by discovering that 'the eye does not really perceive paintings holistically, nor really perceive words sequentially' (Torgovnick, 1985: 31). Paul Kolars, for instance, studied and recorded the movements of people's eyes while looking at paintings and at written pages. He came to the conclusion that 'in reading and looking, people use many different inspection strategies, have many different options available, to achieve approximately the same end – an interpretation or comprehension of the object being examined' (Kolars, 1977: 155). When observing a painting, the eye focuses on a number of points, which vary according to the observer. Likewise, when reading a page the patterns of eye movements vary extensively, not according to the traditional ethnocentric idea that when reading, the eye moves from left to right, following each word, line after line. If we look at two distinct diagrams of eye fixations – one for painting, the other for a written text (Kolars, 1977: 157-158) – the patterns appear to be very similar, as opposed to what one may think if they believed in Lessing's words.

Lessing's rigid division was also challenged by the art critic Rudolf Arnheim. Acknowledging time as an essential element when perceiving an artwork, he wrote:

the perceiving of a work of art is not accomplished suddenly. More typically, the observer starts from somewhere, tries to orient himself as to the main skeleton of the work, looks for the accents, experiments with a tentative framework in order to see whether it fits the total content, and so on. When the exploration is successful, the work is seen to repose comfortably in a congenial structure, which illuminates the work's meaning to the observer (Arnheim, 1969: 35).

Another twentieth-century psychologist, Ernest Gilman, further confirms that the reading of a painting and of a text are carried out in a similar way. He recognises that '[b]oth experiences consist in two phases that might be called 'reading' and 'seeing'—a processional and an integrative, or reflective, phase which together generate understanding' (Gilman, 1978: 10), even though the act of seeing parts and wholes in the text and in the canvas, as well as the amount of time required for reading the two mediums differ.

The witness reads a literary text from page to page over time. But his understanding is ideally not complete until he 'sees' the work as a whole, as if spatialized in his mind as a simultaneous pattern of significance. [...] it may take shape before he has finished the book, or perhaps not before he has read it many times; it will certainly grow richer and more clearly defined through re-reading (Gilman, 1978: 10).

Then, he describes the experience of painting, noting how it resembles that of literature:

The witness sees the painting as a pattern but he does not understand it fully until he "reads" it [...] moving from one detail to another over time ... The order of experience in painting (seeing first, then "reading") is superficially the reverse of the literary experience, except that the final painting which, having been seen and "read" is finally known, is no longer identical with the square of canvas we happened to notice when we first walked into the room (Gilman, 1978: 11).

According to Gilman's theories, then, it seems that the visual arts may help enhance the expressivity of a text, since the mingling of the two does not bother the viewer's reading nor his perception of the whole work.

This theory is confirmed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault,

who comments upon Velasquez's *Las Meninas*: 'confronted by the visible, they prove insufferably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say'. However, he claims, 'through the medium of [...] language, the painting may, little by little release its illuminations' (Foucault, 1970: 9-10).

The solid division between the verbal-temporal and the oral-spatial supported by Lessing has finally been challenged. This allowed writers to make use of new theories and experiment with their written works, borrowing ways of approaching reality from the visual arts. Writers in the twentieth century, therefore, were not only concerned with verbal techniques, but also with visual and figurative techniques of representation; the concept of 'ut pictura poesis' was again revived. Writers and painters could work together to create a medium that would best represent reality, rather than against each other for the race towards supremacy, and so they began influencing each other's works. The approach to mimesis in the Modern age eventually developed into a concept that did not have much to do with realistic representation of objects and nature, but which had much in common with the expression of inner subjectivity and the workings of the mind.

Virginia Woolf took part in this artistic change and she certainly questioned the influences of the verbal on the visual, as well as those of the visual on the verbal arts. Indeed, Woolf had various relationships not only with other writers, but also with painters and art critics throughout her life. '[H]er deepest, most basic sense of art was of the art championed by Bloomsbury and practiced by her sister – twentieth-century art, rooted in the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists and advancing eagerly into Cubism, abstraction, and other innovations'. Indeed, 'she was always alert to points at which the visual arts could clarify her ideas about the nature of fiction' (Torgovnick, 1985: 62).



Image 2: Bell, Dust jacket for *The Moment and Other Essays* (1948)

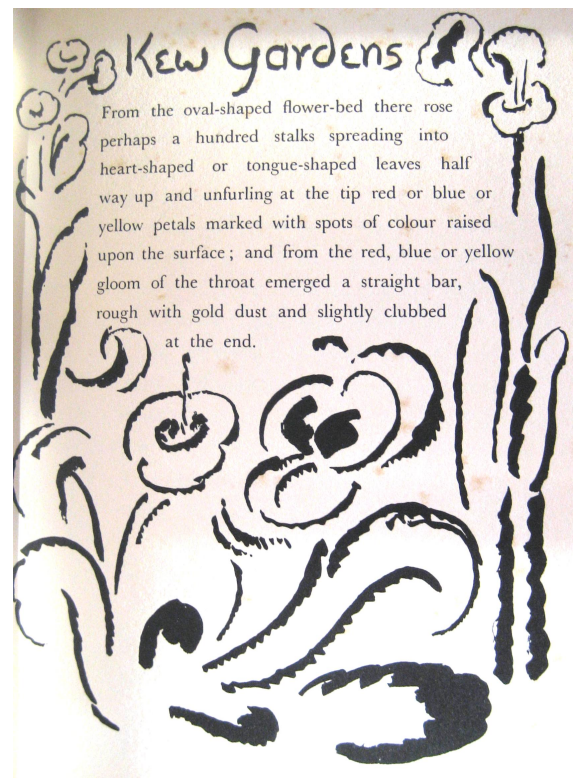


Image 3: Bell, Illustrated page 1 of 'Kew Gardens' (1927)

Woolf certainly explored the issue of merging the arts in her writings and she also attempted at doing such merging herself. As one reads in Diane Gillespie's *The Sisters' Arts*, 'Virginia Woolf liked to use her writer's vocabulary to describe her sister's painting, just as she used to like metaphors from the visual arts to describe writing' (Gillespie, 1988: 278). The following chapter will provide an analysis of the writer's concerns about this verbal-visual relationship.

## 2. Virginia Woolf and the sister arts

Not only is the relationship among the various forms of art a topic of discussion as old as time, but it also haunted Woolf throughout her whole life. 'The best critics, Dryden, Lamb, Hazlitt, were acutely aware of the mixture of elements, and wrote of literature with music and painting in their minds' (Woolf, 'Walter Sickert', CE II: 242), Woolf wrote in her essay 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation'<sup>3</sup> (1934). Whereas in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' (1927) Woolf maintained that fiction is capable of conveying

the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us by crowds [...] obscure terrors and hatreds [...] the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine. Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions, which have not yet been expressed (Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', CE II: 229).

In 'Pictures' (1925) Virginia further contemplates the idea that 'a professor' would write a book that is 'concerned with the flirtations between music, letters, sculpture and architecture, and the effects that the arts have had upon each other throughout the ages' (Woolf, 'Pictures', TM: 140). However, her inquiry would lead to the idea that 'literature has always been the most sociable and the most impressionable of them all; that sculpture influenced Greek literature, music Elizabethan, architecture the English of the eighteenth century, and now undoubtedly we are under the dominion of painting' (Woolf, 'Pictures', TM: 140).

In her writings Woolf mentions and plays with various arts. Nonetheless, she was mainly concerned with literature and painting, which, according to what she writes in her essay 'Walter Sickert', 'though they must part in the end,

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Sickert (1860-1942) was an English painter, who was very influential on the British art scene of the twentieth century. He is especially believed particularly relevant in the artistic transition from Impressionism to Modernism.

painting and writing have much to tell each other, they have much in common' (Woolf, 'Walter Sickert', CE II: 241).

Virginia Woolf's inquiry on the interrelation between the two arts was prompted by the Bloomsbury circle and its various artists. Such a cultural and intellectual environment allowed the writer to be constantly in dialogue with painters, other writers and critics as well. The fact that intellectuals and artists were a great part of Woolf's world for most of her life, allowed her to keep in touch with the new trends within the visual arts, as well as within modern ideas and literary fashions.

Nevertheless, young Virginia had limited contacts with the new trends in the modern arts. In fact, the Stephens were rooted in the Victorian era and the artists visiting the family, such as the writer William Thackeray and the painter George Watts, were mostly Victorian personalities. With a father and brothers working in the literary field, a mother modelling for painters and a sister painter, art definitely formed 'the very texture and fabric of Woolf's life' (Torgovnick, 1985: 61), although it was initially the Victorian art that surrounded her.

In the twentieth century, however, it was her relationship with Bloomsbury artists and others that became essential for the development of her poetics, her experimenting and her accomplishments. 'I was chiefly impressed by the Gertlers; Vanessa, too, very good: Duncan, I thought, a little pretty' (Woolf, D I: 72), we read in her diary. Within her circle she could develop her interart studies, and discuss with her colleagues: '[w]ith Lytton I talk about reading, [...] with Nessa about people, with Roger about art; with Morgan about writing' (Woolf, L III: 337). Woolf frequently compared words and painting not only in her private writings or critical essays but in her novels as well. In fact, her remarks about the visual arts, as well as about the differences between writers and painters, are abundant in her writing. A case in point would, indeed, be how the two perceive colours: her sister certainly believed

that painters pursue capturing the look of things, focusing on the exact shades of colour for their own sake, whereas writers focus more on the impression that such colours make upon them. For instance, when looking at grey hair, painters see 'a grey as different from other greys as one chord in music is different from others' (Bell, 1997: 156), whilst writers interpret the colour as a social marker, thus viewing grey as the indicator of an old person.

The members of the Bloomsbury group were sceptical towards the idea of merging painting and literature, and Woolf had her reservations too. As it appears in her diary entries and letters, sometimes she agreed with painters, but other times she disagreed with them. Notwithstanding this, she would turn to her fellow painters to discuss her work, believing that they were 'qualified however, much more than many of [her] literary friends to judge of things as a whole, as works of art' (Woolf, L III: 383). Yet, Virginia Woolf's appreciation for painters and their work did not characterise the writer since the beginning of her career but it was only with time that she learnt to enjoy the visual arts. Indeed, before the 1920s Virginia believed the task of the painter and that of the writer to be substantially different. In 1921, for instance, she wrote to Vanessa that 'your art is far more of a joke than mine' (Bell, quoted in Dunn, 1991: 151).

In 1901 painting was only ranked third in the hierarchy of the Muses made by the young Woolf: '[t]he only thing in this world is music - music and books and one or two pictures' (Woolf, L I: 41). However, three years later a comparison between literature and painting appeared in her writings. In fact, she wrote about her envy for the painter's lifestyle: as opposed to the work 'done in the open' of a painter, 'a poor wretch of an author keeps all his thoughts in a dark attic in his own brain, and when they come out in print they look so shivering and naked'. Nonetheless, these early years her comparisons led her preference towards the more complex literature: '[p]ictures are easier to understand than subtle literature, so I think I shall become an artist to the public, and keep my writing to myself' (Woolf, L I: 170).



The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed important developments of the visual arts. Indeed, two major exhibitions took place in England, which allowed Woolf to increase her knowledge of 'Modern' art. However, her going to galleries and exhibitions was not a matter of pure aesthetic enjoyment. In 1912, for instance, she wrote: "[t]he Grafton, thank God, is over; artists are an abominable race. The furious excitement of these people over their pieces of canvas coloured green and blue, is odious' (Woolf, L II: 15); in 1918, after a visit to the New English Art Club, she wrote 'the drowsy stupidity of the painter's point of view appalled me' (Woolf, L II: 257), further claiming that 'I know not how far it is relevant to compare literature with painting' (Woolf, 1995: 382) in 1921.

However, on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1918, after visiting the National Gallery she wrote:

I see why I like pictures; it's as things that stir me to describe them. [...] I insist (for the sake of my aesthetic soul) that I don't want to read stories or emotions or anything of the kind into them; only pictures that appeal to my plastic sense of words make me want to have them for still life in my novel (Woolf, D I: 168).

A year later she visited the Royal Academy, on which she commented that 'I get an immense deal of pleasure from working out the pictures' (Woolf, L II: 377).

During the 1920s, moreover, she referred to her books as 'canvases' in her diary (she was working on *To the Lighthouse* at the time), clearly mixing the work of writers with that of painters. However, in 1922 in a letter to the French painter Jacques Reverat she acknowledged that 'we are so lonely and separated in our adventures as writers and painters' (Woolf, L II: 592).

Woolf could not make up her mind on the matter and she kept questioning the affinities and dissimilarities of the two arts, also influenced by the artistic environment that surrounded her. During her writing career, in fact, Woolf wondered '[h]ow deeply can an artist carry his "raids across the boundaries" of another art before he becomes its victim? To what extent can a writer be a "safe guide" to the visual arts, or a painter to the world of fiction? Is

one art superior to another? Are painters happier than writers? "Is their world happier?" (Mares, 1989: 327) (Mares quotes from Woolf's *Roger Fry*, 'Pictures' and her Diaries); In what ways does the painter's world differ from the writer's? Is it possible to treat paintings like novels? (Woolf, 1989: 337).

Although Woolf often makes use of 'painterly' terms when speaking of both the visual and the written page, her observations about their relationship are filled with territorial references, such as 'boundaries', 'borders' or 'margins'. She further talks about 'raids' and 'transgressions', when addressing to the explorations of a 'foreign' area. Woolf indeed treated the two arts as separate entities, belonging to distinct, rival worlds.

Most of all she wondered whether one art was superior to the other; indeed, 'a sense of rivalry, and uncertainty' (Mares, 1989: 333) runs through her commentary on the arts. In 1928, for instance, she wrote to her nephew Quentin Bell:

Your letter has been rather a great surprise to me; because, if you can write as well as that, with such abandonment to devilry and ribaldry, [...], how in God's name can you be content to remain a painter? Surely you must see the infinite superiority of the language to the paint? Think how many things are impossible in paint; giving pain to the Keynes', making fun of one's aunts, telling libidinous stories, making mischief - these are only a few of the advantages; against which a painter has nothing to show: for all his merits are also a writer's. Throw up your career, for God's sake (Woolf, 1989: 234).

Not only does she claim here that writing is superior to painting, but she repeats the concept elsewhere too.

Indeed, in various pieces of writing Woolf compared the lively writing - more apt to portray the hustle of life - to the 'silent kingdom of paint'. In fact, whilst Virginia loved wandering around the busy streets of London 'in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, the motorcars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the

jingle' (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 2000: 4), which are an active source of inspiration for her works, her sister's pictures were hung in 'galleries [...], sanctuaries, where silence reigns supreme' (Woolf, 'Pictures', TM: 142). Pictures are silent because they carry no verbal message, nor do they leave an impression upon the viewer: '[t]here they hang as if the passage of centuries had left them indifferent. In private stress or public disaster we can wring no message from them' (Woolf, 'Pictures and Portraits', 1988: 163).

According to Woolf, painters

lose their power directly they attempt to speak. They must say what they have to say by shading greens into blues, posing block upon block. They must weave their spells like mackerel behind the glass at the aquarium, mutely, mysteriously. Once let them raise the glass and begin to speak, and the spell is broken (Woolf, 'Pictures', TM: 142).

'Picasso, Sickert, Mrs. Bell [...] are all mute as mackerel' (Woolf, 'Pictures', 1964: 143) we read some pages below in 'Pictures'. Furthermore, commenting upon her sister's work, on the occasion of a catalogue for her work, Virginia said:

One asks, does she show any special knowledge of clothes? One replies, Stark nakedness seems to please her as well. Is she dainty then, or austere? Does she like riding? Is she red haired or brown eyed? Was she ever at university? Does she prefer herrings or brussels sprouts? Is she—for our patience is becoming exhausted—not a woman at all, but a mixture of Goddess and peasant, treading the clouds with her feet and with her hands shelling peas? Any writer so ardently questioned would have yielded something to our curiosity. One defies a novelist to keep his life through twenty-seven volumes of fiction safe from scrutiny. But Mrs. Bell says nothing. Mrs. Bell is as silent as the grave (Woolf, quoted in Rosenbaum, 1995: 204).

Woolf thought that the painter's work differed greatly from that of the writer, as images do not share the verbal concerns of the novel. Painters seemed less interested in narrating and communicating what is hidden in one's consciousness and Virginia viewed the art of her sister as silent as well.

This issue is also evident in her fiction, when, for instance, towards the ending of *Between the Acts*, Lucy Swithin 'stopped by the great picture of Venice—school of Canaletto. Possibly in the hood of the gondola there was a little figure—a woman, veiled; or a man?' (Woolf, BA: 407). Painting clearly cannot explain the mysteries and secrets of human characters.

Nonetheless, at other times Woolf feels that words are inadequate to express the artist's sensations or to depict a scene in its beauty. On those occasions, painting becomes the superior art. She wrote to her sister:

Only - well, in Duncan's highlands, the colours in a perfectly deep blue lake of green and purple trees reflected in the middle of the water which was enclosed with green reeds, and yellow flags, and the whole sky and a purple hill - well, enough. One should be a painter. As a writer, I feel the beauty, which is almost entirely colour, very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen, as if you poured a large jug of champagne over a hairpin (Woolf, 1989: 404).

The response of the painter seems indeed the more appropriate way of rendering reality at times. A further example is the letter she wrote to Quentin Bell on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1930:

It is five o'clock on a fine evening, and if I were a painter I should take my colours to the window and do a brilliant little panel of the clouds over the hotel; how I should like bowling them round and filling them in with fiery white and bluish grey (Woolf, L IV: 142).

During a trip to France, the beauty of a landscape once again 'no longer makes me feel for my pen - its too easy' (Woolf, D IV: 314).

Virginia Woolf commented repeatedly on the ineffectiveness of language, when compared to painting. Even though a writer can describe what they see, Woolf defined words as an 'impure medium', since they may not be able to convey what a picture expresses.

To Woolf, in fact, the main difference between literature and painting is how each craft expressed sensations. For instance, she commented about her

sister's paintings, noticing that 'her vision excites a strong emotion and yet when we have dramatized it or poetised it or translated it into all the blues and greens, and fines and exquisites and subtles of our vocabulary, the picture itself escapes [...] this strange painters' world in which mortality does not enter, and psychology is held at bay and there are no words' (Rosenbaum, 1995: 204).

All in all, Virginia Woolf's attitude towards the sister arts is summarised in her essay on 'Walter Sickert', which concludes by claiming that

for though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other; they have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see. Gardens, rivers, skies, clouds changing, the colour of a woman's dress, landscapes that bask beneath lovers, twisted woods that people walk in when they quarrel—novels are full of pictures like these. The novelist is always saying to himself how can I bring the sun on to my page? How can I show the night and the moon rising? And he must often think that to describe a scene is the worst way to show it. It must be done with one word, or with one word in skilful contrast with another. [...] They both speak at once, striking two notes to make one chord, stimulating the eye of the mind and of the body. [...] Undoubtedly, they [the people discussing the arts in the essay] agreed, the arts are closely united (Woolf, 'Walter Sickert', CE II: 241-2).

Indeed,

[w]ere all modern paintings to be destroyed, a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cézanne, Derain and Picasso; he would be able to say with those books before him that painters of the highest originality and power must be covering canvas after canvas, squeezing tube after tube, in the room next door (Woolf, 'Pictures', TM: 140).

### 3. Artistic influences in Virginia Woolf's aesthetics

The ambiguous attitude of Virginia Woolf towards the relationship between the visual and the verbal produced the conditions for her fascination for the realm of the visual on the one hand, but also for her feeling of being a stranger within it, on the other. She certainly believed that writing was capable of expressing something that painting could not, yet she was fascinated by the world of painters and their mute brushstrokes, which she often thought to be more eloquent than words. This issue was discussed among the members of Bloomsbury on the whole, but the most influential figures within the group were, for Woolf, the art critic Roger Fry and her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell.

Although at a very young age Virginia tried painting and took some lessons, she soon focused on writing. In fact, the Bell sisters were both interested in the verbal and visual arts but each riveted mainly around one: 'I cannot remember a time when Virginia did not want to be a writer and I a painter' (Bell, 1974: n.p.), recalled Vanessa. Even though each sibling specialised in one art, Vanessa and Virginia maintained a relationship that was not only personal, but also artistic and they worked together several times.

Examples of their mutual influences and collaborations are evident in the influence of Vanessa's paintings upon her sister's literary descriptions or in the subjects of Vanessa's canvases that were inspired by Virginia's writing. After reading 'The Searchlight' by Virginia in 1939, Vanessa, indeed, revealed that the short story was 'too full of suggestions for picture almost. They leap into my mind at every turn. Your writing always does that for me to some extent, but I think this one more than usual' (Marler, 1993: 454). Vanessa even sketched illustrations and dustjackets of many works by Virginia; the 1927 edition of 'Kew Gardens' (image 2) is a relevant instance, which Frances Spalding defines as 'the boldest and most effective of their collaborations' (Spalding, 1994: 221).

Virginia loved Vanessa very much and they were such close friends in life that Vanessa's artistic tastes became Virginia's own. In fact, since a young

age Vanessa moved away from traditional Victorian painters, like Watts, and rather sympathised for the French Impressionists but also for their American followers, such as Sargent and Whistler (Shone, 1976: 21-2). Certainly, the Impressionist visual arts deeply characterised Woolf's writing, especially in her early stories and novels.

Gillespie, who studied the friendship between the two sisters, noticed that Virginia and Vanessa 'communicated similar perceptions and values by means of parallel aesthetic strategies' (Gillespie, 1988: 19).

The two, indeed, visited museums and exhibitions together, they discussed the arts, they frequently compared each other's works and theorised about translating one art into the other, and they also wrote to each other about the matter. After seeing an exhibition of her sister's in 1928, for instance, Woolf wrote:

I went to your show and spent an hour making some extremely interesting theories. [...] I had forgotten the extreme brilliancy and flow and wit and ardour of these works. [...] I think you are a most remarkable painter. But I maintain you are into the bargain, a satirist, a conveyer of impressions about human life: a short story writer of great wit and able to bring off a situation in a way that rouses my envy. I wonder if I could write the *Three Women* in prose (Woolf, L III: 498).

Although they worked with different media, the sisters appeared to have similar goals. Vanessa recognised that when she wrote:

Will it seem to you absurd and conceited or will you understand at all what I mean if I tell you that I've been working hard lately at an absurd great picture [*The Nursery*, 1930-1932] I've been painting off and on the last 2 years—and if I could only do what I want to—but I can't—it seems to me it would have some sort of analogous meaning to what you've done. How can one explain, but to me painting a floor covered with toys and keeping them all in relation to each other and the figures and the space of the floor and the light on it means something of the same sort that you seem to me to mean (Woolf, L IV: 391).

Not only did the two share aesthetic views, but they also discussed those

and confronted each other's ideas, as well as works. In 1918 Woolf even sent her sister her revolutionary short story 'Kew Gardens', asking in a letter to:

Tell me what you think of the story. I'm going to write an account of my emotions towards one of your pictures, which gives me infinite pleasure, and has changed my views upon aesthetics. [...] Its a question of half-developed aesthetic emotions, constantly checked by others of a literary nature- in fact it's all very interesting and intense (Woolf, L II: 257).

Both were interested in how visual techniques could be applied to writing, as well as in how verbal techniques could be adopted in paintings.

Vanessa, for instance, wrote to Virginia in 1909:

Your theories of art are very interesting [..]. I don't see how you use colour in writing, but probably you can do it with art. The mere gold or yellow or grey mean nothing to me unless I can see the exact quality of the colour, but I suppose if you do it well you can convey that. But I don't see how you can ever count upon the reader getting just the right impression, as you can in a painting, when it comes to describing the looks of things. Perhaps you don't really describe the looks but only the impression the looks made upon you (Bell, 1993: 87).

Even though Woolf viewed the visual and verbal codes as having each their own characteristics and requirements, and therefore perceived them as divided arts, she believed that the use of visuality followed similar aesthetic principles in both arts.

Another significant personality affecting Woolf and the development of her aesthetics was the art historian and critic Roger Fry. He was very influential in the British cultural and artistic scene of the early twentieth century and he reached the public through journals, magazines and books. Fry did not only promote new ideas but he also favoured the chance of creating a closer bond between the arts during the early twentieth century. His activity was a major source for the English artistic scene and its culture, since he helped intellectuals keep in touch with modern artists. In fact, he is mostly known for his two exhibitions at Grafton Galleries in 1910 and 1912, through which he introduced



the revolution of the French arts to the public.

The 1910 exhibition 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' was certainly very influential in the English intellectual and artistic scene; so much so that on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1910 Arnold Bennet wrote:

The exhibition of the so-called 'Neo-Impressionists', over which the culture of London is now laughing, has an interest which is perhaps not confined to the art of painting [...] it has a slight, vague repercussion upon literature [...]. It is talking to several of these painters [...] and particularly listening to their conversations [...], that I have come to connect their ideas with literature (Bennett, 1917: 280-85).

Roger Fry did not only introduce people to the 'new art', but, more importantly, he taught them how to look at and understand paintings. He made pictures speak, and turned the 'silent sanctuaries' into lively environments, as Woolf acknowledged:

Pictures were to many of us - if I may generalize - things that hung upon walls; silent inscrutable patterns; treasure houses with locked doors in front of which learned people would stop, and about which they would lecture, saying that they were of this period or of that, of this school, or of that, probably by this master, but perhaps on the other hand by one of his disciples. And we would trail behind them silent, servile and bored. Then all of a sudden those pictures began to flash light and colour; and our guides, those respectable professors, began to argue and quarrel, called each other - if I remember rightly- liars and cheats and altogether began to behave like living people arguing about something of vital importance. What had happened? What had brought this life and colour, this racket and din into the quiet galleries of ancient art? It was that Roger Fry had gathered together the Post-Impressionist Exhibition in Dover Street; and the names of Cézanne and Gauguin, of Matisse and Picasso suddenly became [...] hotly debated (Woolf, 'Roger Fry', CE IV: 88).

Roger Fry is now often associated with the introduction of Post-Impressionism in England (a concept that appeared in Britain to name those artworks produced after the Impressionist wave) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although there were numerous exhibitions, magazines and

art critics speculating on the matter, Roger Fry was among the most known and most significant characters of the English artistic scene.

Fry defended the new art, which was uncomprehended by the public. He understood Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and the following artistic movements as an extreme reaction to realism; he viewed them as transforming the traditional notions of portraying reality through 'the reestablishment of purely aesthetic criteria in place of the criterion of conformity to appearance [and] the rediscovery of the principles of structural design and harmony' (Fry, 1920: 8). As Woolf wrote in his biography, Fry 'would explain that it was quite easy to make the transition from Watts to Picasso; there was no break, only a continuation. They were only pushing things a little further. He demonstrated; he persuaded; he argued. The argument rose and soared. It vanished into the clouds. Then it swooped back to the picture' (Woolf, 1969: 152).

He also explained how in modern paintings artists did not imitate reality as the earlier realists used to do, but they rather made their canvases express life. Artists, he maintains, 'do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality'. The aim of this new art is not:

to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities (Fry, 1920: 157).

Whereas the majority of the public, as well as critics, perceived Post-Impressionists as a revolutionary break from tradition and ancient values, Fry perceived it as an evolution of the previous movement, thus of French Impressionism.

According to Fry, Post-Impressionist painters rethought the aim of art and abandoned traditional mimetic principles in order to emphasise the purely decorative characteristic of painting and to establish the primacy of colour, design and form. The critic further explained that, with this new art, French artists attempted at expressing 'by pictorial and plastic form certain spiritual experiences' (Fry, 1920: 156). Such idea was greatly influential on Virginia Woolf's writing; she, indeed, acknowledged that 'pictures have never gone back to their walls. They are no longer silent, decorous and dull. They are things we live with, and laugh at, love and discuss. And I think I am right in saying that it was Roger Fry more than anybody who brought about this change' (Woolf, 'Roger Fry', CE IV: 88).

Woolf could finally appreciate the eloquence of the visual; in her diary from 1918 we read, for instance, how Fry helped her understand how to look at paintings:

Nor did I show myself one of the elect, with regard to painting at least. We visited the National Gallery together this morning; I thought a Rembrandt "very fine" which to him was mere melodrama. A little El Greco conveyed little until he illumined it; showed how it held more real colour than any other picture there. Then the Ingres was repulsive to me; & to him one of the most marvellous designs (Woolf, D I: 228).

The writer was able, thanks to Fry's teachings, not only to appreciate paintings but also to look at literature with a painter's eye.

Fry was appreciated by Woolf not only as an art critic, but also as a friend. She liked discussing about art with him; however, they did not just talk about visual art but they copiously conversed about literature as well:

I dined with Roger and met Clive. We [...] discussed literature and aesthetics. [...] I said one could, and certainly did, write with phrases, not only words; but that didn't help things on much. Roger asked me if I founded my writing upon texture or upon structure; I connected structure with plot, and therefore said 'texture'. Then we discussed the meaning of structure and texture

in painting and writing. Then we discussed Shakespeare, and Roger said Giotto excited him just as much (Woolf, D I: 80).

The two friends and colleagues shared some concerns about the influence of the painterly and the literary on each other, which Woolf mentions in her biography of Roger Fry. Moreover, they shared the idea that 'the arts of painting and writing lay close together' (Woolf, 1969: 239) and that they 'should work out their theories side by side' (Woolf, 1969: 172).

Woolf wrote in her diary that 'Roger and I get on very well now; more genuine and free than we were under the shadow of Gordon Square [...] We agree on many points [...] Then we discuss prose; and as usual some book is had out; and I have to read a passage over his shoulder. Theories are fabricated. Pictures stood on chairs' (Woolf, D I: 225). Woolf exchanged letters with Fry, asking for his opinion on her written works as well:

I'm sending you my novel tomorrow - a little reluctantly. It has some merit, but its too much of an experiment. I am buyoed up, as usual, by the thought that I'm now, at last, going to bring it off - next time. I suppose one goes on thinking this for ever; and so burrowing deeper and deeper into whatever it is that perpetually fascinates. Why don't you come back and explain it? - you are the only person who ever does (Woolf, 1989: 148).

However, Virginia did not always fully agree with the critic's opinions and theories; she believed that he could not be 'a safe guide' when it comes to his comments upon literature, since '[h]e looked at the carpet from the wrong side';

but he made it for that very reason display unexpected patterns. And many of his theories held good for both arts. Design, rhythm, texture - there they were again - in Flaubert as in Cézanne. And he would hold up a book to the light as if it were a picture and show where in his view - it was a painter's of course - it fell short (Woolf, 1969: 240).

Indeed, it is because of his different viewpoint, 'a painter's of course', that she considered Fry inspiring. 'You have kept me on the right path, so far as writing

goes, more than anyone' (Woolf, L III: 385) she wrote in a letter to him, referring to his help as critic while she was writing her novel *To the Lighthouse*.

A theory of Fry was especially influential on Virginia Woolf's writing: in the 'new kind of literary painting' he believed, 'ideas, symbolised by forms, could be juxtaposed, contrasted and combined almost as they can be by words on a page' (Fry, 1919: 724). In order to prove his theory, in 1919 Fry carried out an experiment, where he attempted at translating a painting by Léopold Survage into words.

### The Town

Houses, always houses, yellow fronts and pink fronts jostle one another, push one another this way and that way, crowd into every corner and climb to the sky; but however close they get together the leaves of trees push into their interstices, and mar the drilled decorum of their ranks; hard green leaves, delicate green leaves, veined all over with black lines, touched with rust between the veins, always more and more minutely articulated, more fragile and more irresistible. But the houses do not despair, they continue to line up, precise and prim, flat and textureless; always they have windows all over them and insides, banisters, cornices, friezes; always in their proper places; they try to deny the leaves, but the leaves are harder than the houses and more persistent. Between houses and leaves there move the shapes of men; more transient than either, they scarcely leave a mark; their shadows stain the walls for a moment; they do not even rustle the leaves (Fry, 1919: 724).



Image 4: Survage, *La Ville* (1911)

Fry then compared the style of the translated Survage with Woolf's use of words, from which he realized: 'I see, now that I have done it, that it was meant for Mrs. Virginia Woolf - that Survage is almost precisely the same thing in paint that Mrs Virginia Woolf is in prose' (Fry, 1919: 724).

Roger Fry commented on Woolf's writing also in 1923, appreciating her use of visuality whilst describing a journey to Spain. He acknowledged that '[y]ou really needn't want to paint when you can do a landscape like that [...] it's astonishing how much of the whole atmosphere you get into a few words

[...]. There are landscapes in Proust which do certain things paintings can't' (Fry, 1972: 486). Fry himself drew the analogy between painting and writing, even acknowledging that a text could sometimes beat visual expression.

A deeper and more complete analysis of Woolf's works, as well as an introduction of Impressionism - an artistic movement that greatly influenced her writing - will be presented in the following chapters.

#### 4. Woolf's Visuality: Impressionist and Post-Impressionist aesthetics on the canvas and on the page

Virginia Woolf certainly believed that

[t]he novelist after all wants to make us see. Gardens, rivers, skies, clouds changing, the colour of a woman's dress, landscapes that bask beneath lovers, twisted woods that people walk in when they quarrel—novels are full of pictures like these. The novelist is always saying to himself how can I bring the sun on to my page? How can I show the night and the moon rising? And he must often think that to describe a scene is the worst way to show it (Woolf, 'Walter Sickert' CE II: 241).

The writer constantly experimented with words and was always looking for a way to 'bring the sun onto [the] page'. 'Words must be found for a moon-lit sky, for a stream, for plane-trees after rain. They "must" be found' (Lyon, 1977: 63).

Much Woolfian criticism throughout the years has tended to view Virginia Woolf's writing style as gradually progressing from Impressionism towards Post-Impressionism. '[H]er deepest, most basic sense of art was [...] [that of] twentieth-century art, rooted in the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists and advancing eagerly into Cubism, abstraction, and other innovations' (Torgovnick, 1985: 62). The writer certainly found inspiration in various artistic movements, in fact, Woolf 'found in the abstracting tendencies of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and later art the visual equivalents to deeply felt aspects of her own philosophy' (Torgovnick, 1985: 128).

Ralph Freedman maintains that Virginia viewed the design of her novels in the 1920s 'chiefly in terms of an analogy with painting, precisely with Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art' (Freeman, 2015: 203). Post-Impressionist features are unquestionably more frequently adopted in Woolf's later works, whereas her earlier writing relied highly on Impressionist techniques of representation. Nonetheless, one cannot say that Impressionist writing entirely disappears in her later novels. Allen McLaurin, indeed, claims



that 'Impressionism still has its valuable place even in Woolf's later texts, though it must constantly struggle with the Post-Impressionist logic of form and design' (McLaurin, 1973: 184).

It seems that Woolf adopted the characteristics of the movements that better fitted her aim, rather than choosing between one or the other. In fact, it was not a 'struggle' between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, rather it was a peaceful coexistence, where the two complemented each other and worked together to obtain the perfect representation of the world on her page. In the following chapters, however, the focus will be on how Impressionist aesthetics manifest within Woolf's fiction. '[S]urely the Impressionist style would come closest of any painterly style to giving Woolf 's words the visual embodiment in the reader's imagination that they seem to demand' (Torgovnick, 1985: 16). Therefore, before analysing her writing, knowledge of Impressionism and its main features must be acquired.

The aesthetics of Impressionism appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century becoming a trend among a little group of French painters, which then extended to literature, poetry, music and even science. The name Impressionism was initially meant to deride and ridicule the works of Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley, but it also came to identify some works by Edouard Manet, Paul Cezanne, Edgar Degas and Camille Pissarro.

This artistic movement holds a great importance for the development of Modern art in the following century, since it provides a shift of perspective and a change in the conception of art. Meyer Schapiro claims that Impressionism initiated the modern conception of painting as 'art of colour', breaking from traditional models of art. 'If a painting is viewed as a text to be deciphered, interpreted, and understood, then the elements of the text are the tones, brushstrokes, and light in their order and harmony, while the subject is only a "pre-text" that has suggested to the painter certain of those elements and relations' (Schapiro, 1997: 11).

The aesthetic of Impressionism promotes first of all a new attitude, a new way of seeing things. The impression alluded to in the movement name refers, in fact, to a sensation, and specifically to the sensation that the artist has when contemplating something, either a landscape, a scene or an object. What painters aim at is reproducing such impressions, the fleeting moment, within their work; Paul Smith claims that ‘they were Impressionists in the sense that they rendered not the landscape, but the sensation produced by that landscape’ (Smith, 1995: 20). The artists’ goal is, therefore, to make the public look at their canvases and feel a precise sensation, that which prompted the painting in the first place. In fact, as Meyer Schapiro writes, ‘the impression, with its component sensations, was viewed as a basic primitive experience’ (Schapiro, 1997: 45) by those artists.

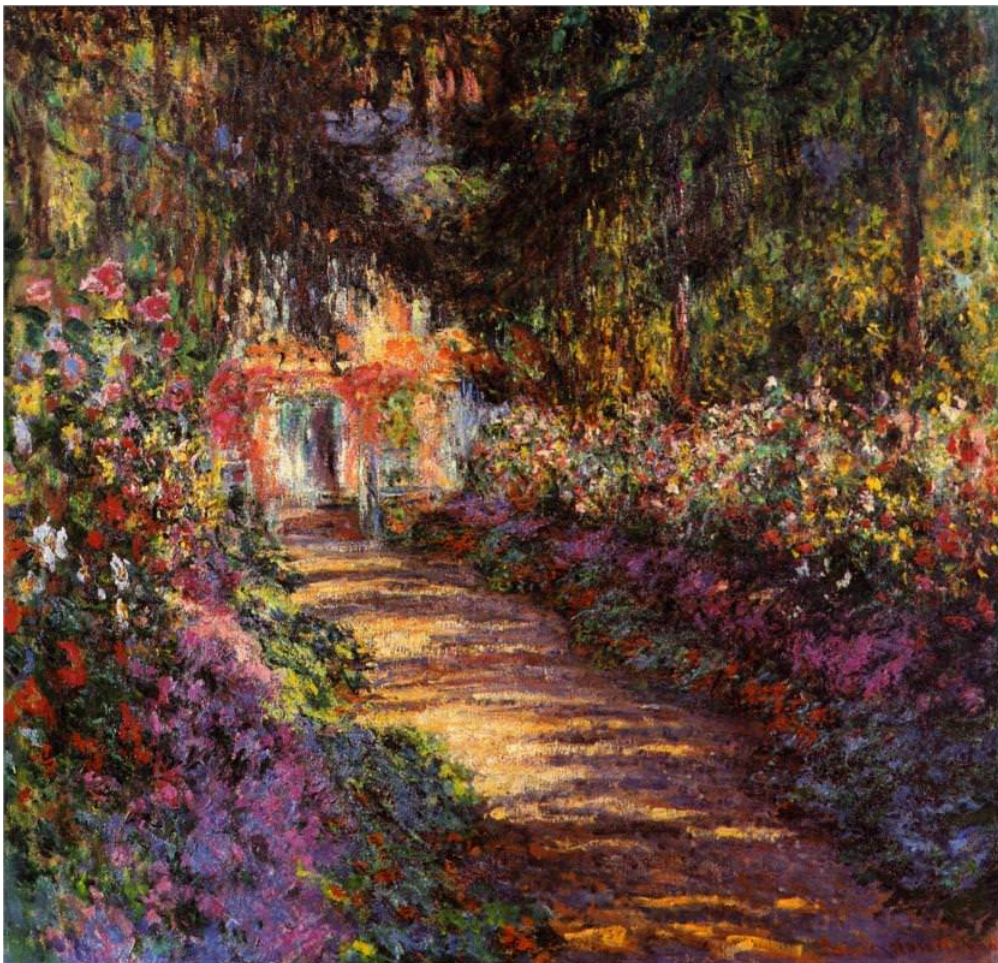


Image 5: Monet, *Le Jardin en Fleurs*, (1900)

Impressionist painters were held to be the beginners of a new art based on such sensations and impressions, and they were able to create a technique capable of representing those – a technique that allowed a harmonious and well-organised layout on the canvas, whilst arousing precise sensations. Impressionists would transfer onto their pictures the evanescent effects of light and atmosphere in order to capture an impression, by which they meant either ‘a kind of rough sketch, normally made on the spot’ or ‘the initial impression a scene made on the mind’ of the artist (Smith, 1995: 19).

A rule for Impressionist painters was, in fact, to only depict scenes and objects that they had observed. The scenes of interest for painters were the environment, either an urban or a rural one, scenes from the everyday life, as well as scenes of recreation. Impressionist paintings often depicted holiday or leisure landscapes and sights as well. The main themes of focus for painters while creating their compositions on canvases were elements, such as the sunlight, the open air, the sky and its moving clouds, as well as water movements and scenes from the surrounding environment.

The visual repertoire of Impressionism may, thence, be viewed as expressing an enjoyment for an ideal environment. Attention must be paid to the term environment now because it differs from the term nature, since, in our western conception, the environment implies a conscious and active creature within it, claims Schapiro. Which means that man is located within a limited space, ‘a milieu’ (Schapiro, 1997: 79). The various environments can be, therefore, related to a certain being, whether human or animal that is not only influenced by it, but they also reshape it and adapt to it.

Whereas in previous artistic conceptions the environment was just a background, a setting where to position people, in the late nineteenth century it acquires a higher value; it becomes an essential element of what is human, since it can arouse emotions and reactions. Impressionist artists, therefore, create a new perception of the relationship between nature and man. In fact,

representations of both areas were ruled by a unique light and atmosphere, as well as by similar colour vibrations; the views described often seemed to be a portrayal of man-made environments that have been affected by nature, but also a portrayal of nature, as modified by man; the landscape, moreover, varied according to light and to the spectator's viewpoint.



Image 6: Sisley, *Lady's Cove, Langland Bay* (1897)

As the art historian H. Harvard Arnason acknowledged, the foundation and centrepiece of Impressionist aesthetics was in the artists' recognition that 'reality rested not so much in the simple objective nature of the natural phenomena - in mountains or trees, or human beings or pots of flowers - as in the eye of the spectator. Landscape and its sea, sky, trees, and mountains in actuality could never be static and fixed. It was a continuously changing

panorama of light and shadow, of moving clouds and reflections on the water’ (Arnason: 21-22).



Image 7: Monet, *La Grenouillère* (1869)

The motifs and settings of Impressionist paintings were also adopted by the literature of the period and were often perceived as interesting by the characters in the text. The heroine in Guy De Maupassant’s novel *Une Vie* (1883), for instance, claims that ‘trois seules choses étaient vraiment belles dans la création: la lumière, l’espace et l’eau’<sup>4</sup> (De Maupassant, 1930: 46). Such motifs, however, were not limited to the period of time in which the movement flourished but they appear in later works, as well.

Indeed, the way Woolf confers a central role to light by submerging views and objects and rooms, as well as her strong interest in colour that readers find in her writing, seem to be based on the aesthetics of the movement.

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<sup>4</sup> only three things in the world were really beautiful: light, space, water.

## **5. Woolf's Impressionism**

Let us now look at Virginia Woolf's employment of Impressionist aesthetics. As Viola Winner claimed in her study upon *Henry James and the Visual Arts*, pictorialism in literature is 'the practice of describing people, places, scenes, or parts of scenes as if they were paintings or subjects for a painting, and the use of art objects for thematic projection and overtone' (Winner, 1970: 70). Indeed, if a reader of Woolf was familiar with Impressionism, they would be able to translate her written words into an imaginary picture.

Although critics and scholars have identified Impressionist elements mainly within Woolf's earlier texts, even her later novels present Impressionist motifs and painterly descriptions. The critic Clive Bell wrote that '[t]his pure, this almost painterlike vision is Virginia Woolf's peculiarity', and he acknowledged how Woolf's vision stemmed from an Impressionist style: '[c]ertainly Mrs Woolf's vision, and superficially her style, may remind one [...] of the French Impressionists [...], technically of their little touches and divisions of tones'. He, indeed, believed that Woolf attempted at expressing her 'peculiar vision', since 'not for ideas, but for visions does she find equivalents' (Bell, 1924: 459-60, 462-3). Even her fictional characters adopt Woolf's belief that inspiration comes from a vision; the painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, wants her artworks to be a translation of 'something she had seen' (Woolf, TTL: 147).

Both real and mental images were, in fact, a fruitful source of verbal stimulation for Woolf and such visual world aroused and inspired both her senses and intellect. The writer was deeply fascinated by the colours and forms of phenomenal reality, in so much that everything she wrote was ruled 'by a sort of visual compulsion' (Stevanato, 2012: 84). This fascination for visual images is evident since her childhood, as we read in 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939). There Woolf writes about her childhood memories of her nursery at

Talland House and what she remembers is connected to the colours of the memory-image, thus with the visual:

It had a balcony; there was a partition, but it joined the balcony of my father's and mother's bedroom. My mother would come out onto her balcony in a white dressing gown. There were passion flowers growing on the wall; they were great starry blossoms, with purple streaks, and large green buds, part empty, part full (Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', 1985: 65-6).

Since 'so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing' (Woolf, 'The Cinema', CE II: 271), anything could be a visual stimulus and allow a chance for description. Virginia herself claimed that 'I shall have to write a novel entirely about carpets, old silver, cut glass and furniture. The desire to describe becomes almost a torment' (Woolf, L II: 284) and that 'I spent an hour looking at pots and carpets in the museum the other day, until the desire to describe them became like the desire for the lusts of the flesh' (Woolf, L II: 285).

Woolf often questioned her work and compared it to that of painters, wondering how she would paint interiors and landscapes, if she was one: '[i]f I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver and green' (Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', 1985: 66). We can say that, for Woolf, the power of visual experience stimulates its verbal translation. However, the medium of language could sometimes make it difficult to translate visual images into verbal form. In 1923 Woolf wrote: '[b]lessed are the painters with their brushes, paints and canvases', to which she added, '[b]ut words are flimsy things. They turn tail at the first approach of visual beauty' (Woolf, 'To Spain', CE IV: 190).

Nonetheless, the writer constantly wondered how she could render a scene with words:

I spent an hour wandering there [the National Gallery], and then I came back and tried to describe my impressions to Vanessa. But I see why I like pictures; its as things that stir me to describe them;

but then only certain pictures do this [...]; only pictures that appeal to my plastic sense of words make me want to have them for still life in my novels (Woolf, D I: 168).

The look of things has a great power over me. Even now, I have to watch the rooks beating up against the wind [...] and still I say to myself instinctively 'What's the phrase for that?' (Woolf, D III: 191)

Virginia's frequent preoccupation was, in fact, how to translate images and scenes from her mind and put them into words. She felt that colours and objects, or scenes, appealed to her whole body, they made an impact within her, which she needed to express: '[w]hat is so vivid to my eyes and not only to my eyes: also to some nervous fibre or fan like membrane in my spine' (Woolf, D III: 191).

In her childhood essay 'A Sketch of the Past' we further read:

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 a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent; I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; [sounds would come through this petal or leaf -] sounds indistinguishable from sights (Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', 1985: 66).

Such description can be addressed to as a verbal painting and it certainly reminds one of an Impressionist canvas. Indeed, Woolf begins her description by thinking in terms of colours at first, and then of shapes, followed by light and sounds. What the writer seems to be doing here is turning her memory into an idea for a painting.

This image definitely, displays the distinct elements of most Impressionist canvases, where 'colours, shapes, sounds, and rhythms merge in a synthesis of sense and emotion' (Stewart, 1982: 237). What an Impressionist



painter does, we read in William Seitz's book on *Claude Monet*, is to work 'directly from nature, striving to render [his] impressions in the face of the most fugitive effects' (quoted in Seitz, 1982: 44). This way of working can be applied to Woolf's writing as well, even though she often writes from visual memory.

The French writer Edmond Duranty claimed that Impressionist artists:

have tried to render the walk, the movement, the tremor, the intermingling of passerby, just as they have tried to render the trembling of leaves, the shivering of water, and the vibration of air inundated with light, and just as, in the case of the rainbow colorings of the solar rays, they have been able to capture the soft ambiance of a grey day (Nochlin, 1966: 7).

Indeed, in her analysis of *Literary Impressionism*, Maria Kroenegger maintains that '[l]ight is the soul of Impressionist paintings, and the soul of Impressionist literature. [...] Reality, for the Impressionist, has become a vision of space, conceived as sensations of light and colour' (Kroenegger, 1973: 42-48).

Woolf shows her sensitivity to the visual, especially to the movements of light and colour, both in her essays, short stories and novels, but also in her private writing. In her *Diary*, for instance, we read: 'the look of clouded emerald which the downs wear, the semi-transparent look, as the sun and shadows change, and the green becomes now vivid now opaque' (Woolf, D I: 185). Her prose definitely abounds with passages of this kind, where colours are related to the changing of light.

In addition, not only Woolf herself, but also her narrators and characters are fascinated by the 'colour, form, texture [of objects] and by the relations these reciprocally establish in rooms, gardens, over tables or furniture' (Stevanato, 2012: 93), as Savina Stevanato claims. In 'Solid Objects' (1920), for instance, John describes 'a piece of china' whose 'colouring was mainly blue, but green stripes or spots of some kind overlaid the blue, and lines of crimson gave it a richness and lustre of the most attractive kind' (Woolf, 'Solid Objects' CSF: 98). Whereas in *Between the Acts* young George loses himself in wonder of a flower: '[i]t

blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. [...] And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete' (Woolf, BA: 311).

Colours are indeed a constant characteristic of Woolf's writing. Her depictions, whether she describes nature, objects or furniture, are 'rich sources of chromatic description' (Stevanato, 2012: 93). Her fascination with colour is clear in her essay 'Walter Sickert', where she explains that:

When I first went into Sickert's show [...] I became completely and solely an insect—all eye. I flew from colour to colour, from red to blue, from yellow to green. Colours went spirally through my body lighting a flare as if a rocket fell through the night and lit up greens and browns, grass and trees, and there in the grass a white bird (Woolf, CE II: 235).

Woolf finally claims that great writers are 'colourists' as well, since they aim at making 'their scenes glow and darken and change to the eye'.



Image 8: Sickert, *Brighton Pierrots* (1915)

Woolf's relation to Impressionism concerns the use of a specific descriptive imagery. The focus of her description was definitely on light, colour and water. 'The quivering, dissolving and changing character of Woolf's colours, according to the reverberations of light and water', indeed, evoke the 'chromatic effects' of Impressionism (Stevanato, 2012: 94).

The similarity between the works of Virginia Woolf and those of painters are mostly evident in Woolf's early fiction and short stories. The most famous instance of her Impressionist style has copiously been identified in the short story 'Kew Gardens'. The piece 'shows quite dramatically how the visual arts helped her to shape her ideas about nature and facilitated her development as a writer' (Torgovnick, 1985: 125). The story presents a basic plot and records numerous evanescent impressions of a warm summer day that the writer recorded in the gardens - Woolf always remembered those gardens in rich visual impressions within her private writings. The intersection of visual and verbal arts in this piece goes so far as releasing some editions accompanied by floral and abstract drawings made by Vanessa Bell both on the book cover and on the pages inside (image 3).

This descriptive narrative shows so clearly how the visual arts helped her develop her ideas about writing, that Arnold Bennett questioned 'the possibility that some writers might do in words what the Neo-Impressionists have done in paint' (Woolf, 1965: 10). The narrator of 'Kew Gardens' certainly seems to take pleasure in lingering on details, and describing the shapes and colours that rise 'from the oval-shaped flower bed'. Indeed, the beginning of the story presents a sketch of nature, reminiscent of Impressionism, where the eye views:

hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer

breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour. The light fell either upon the smooth, grey back of a pebble, or, the shell of a snail with its brown, circular veins, or falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of red, blue and yellow the thin walls of water that one expected them to burst and disappear. Instead, the drop was left in a second silver grey once more, and the light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves. Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July (Woolf, 'Kew Gardens', CSF: 84).

In the passage colour and light are definitely emphasised. Moreover, light is given the ability to alter the coloration of the natural subjects in the picture. In fact, by highlighting small details, as artists would do in a painting, the rays of light manage to guide the eye of the reader/viewer.

The people described in this short story are reduced to 'patches' of colour: '[t]hey walked on past the flower-bed, now walking four abreast, and soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half transparent as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches' (Woolf, 'Kew Gardens', CSF: 85). Whilst writing, Woolf may have followed Monet's instructions upon capturing a scene onto canvas or, in this case, page:

When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you - a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape, until it gives your own naive impression of the scene before you (Nochlin, 1966: 35).

The writer, in fact, happened to use abstract spots of colour at times, which recall the techniques of the Impressionists (especially those of Seurat), but also the 'leopard-spotting' technique of her painter friends Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell. An instance of such technique as for the depiction of floral

gardens can be seen in Duncan Grant's *Garden Path in Spring* (1944) (image 9). His painting of a garden is extremely reminiscent of Monet's images of his secret garden in Giverny (image 5, 10). These similarities among painterly works, indeed, create a close bond between Impressionism and Woolf's aesthetics.



Image 9: Grant, *Garden Path in Spring* (1944)

However, both human and object outlines in the 'Kew Gardens' story are dissolved by light, rather than by coloured spots. Such technique is clear in the final paragraph of the story, which gives that 'watery and reverberating quality' (Stevanato, 2012: 94) that characterises Impressionist painting, to the voices as well. The ending of the story indeed reads:

the glass roofs of the palm house shone as if a whole market full of shiny green umbrellas had opened in the sun; [...] Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men,

women, and children were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then, seeing the breadth of yellow that lay upon the grass, they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue. [...] Voices. Yes, voices. Wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with such depth of contentment, such passion of desire, or, in the voices of children, such freshness of surprise; breaking the silence? [...] the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air (Woolf, 'Kew Gardens', CSF: 89).

Not only Woolf's early writings, but her novels as well, provide a great quantity of images to the readers. Woolf indeed preferred showing, rather than describing; she wanted 'to make you hear, to make you feel - [...] before all, to make you see' (Conrad, 1921: x).

Indeed, as she wrote to her friend Rita Sackville-West, the impact made by the visual is extremely relevant, even when one writes: '[b]ut a novel, as I saw, to be good should seem, before one writes it, something unwriteable: but only visible' (Woolf, L III: 529).

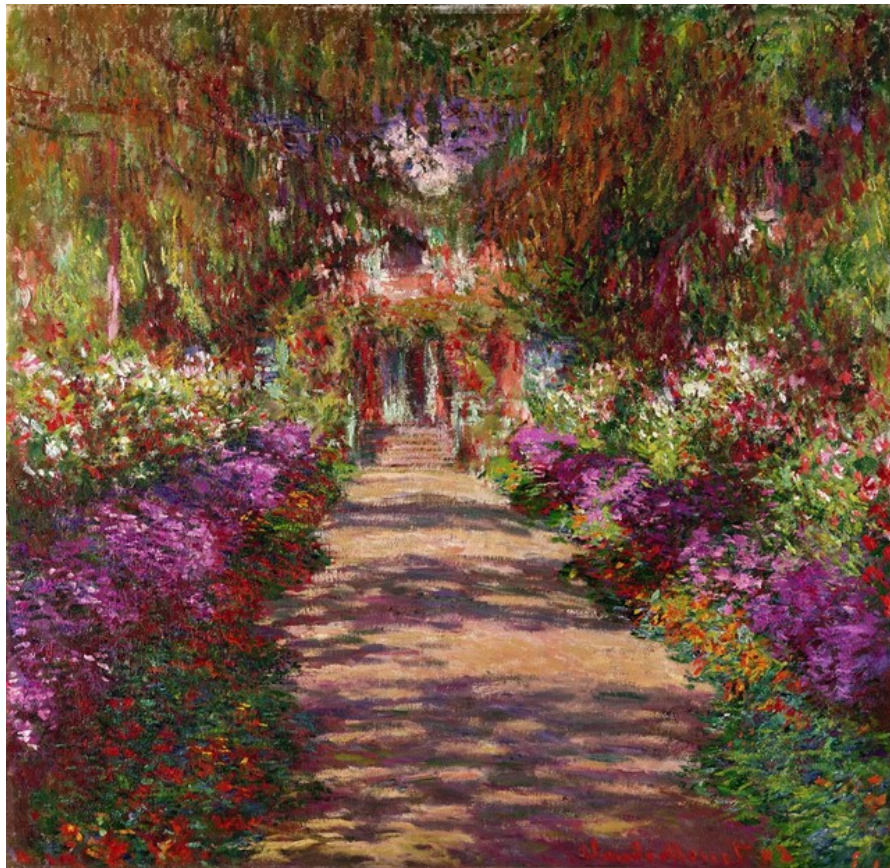


Image 10: Monet, *L'Allée dans le Jardin* (1902)

Let us then consider Virginia Woolf's depictions in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Between the Acts* (1941).

What is striking and has been subject to multiple analyses and studies by critics is, first of all, the fact that many novels by Virginia Woolf have characters that deal with art. Indeed, in both novels - *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Between the Acts* (1941) - we read about an artist of some kind, having to handle artistic enterprises, respectively completing a painting and setting up a pageant. Throughout the novels, which follow the enterprises of their artist protagonists, readers are accompanied by explicit reflections upon how to achieve the representation of reality. The painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, externalises her concerns as artist multiple times throughout the novel, whereas the play producer Miss LaTrobe in *Between the Acts*, questions the relationship between art and life, also through her play. However, besides the references to painting and to the correlation of art and reality in the novels of Virginia Woolf, there is also a great amount of visual images and painterly motifs that recall Impressionist aesthetics.

As for *To the Lighthouse* (1927), readers do not find those long descriptive passages that abound in 'Kew Gardens' but, nevertheless, they encounter numerous beautiful verbal paintings. Critics throughout the years have variously compared the novel to Impressionism, the reason being the dominance of light and water, as well as of colour, in the text. Weisstein, indeed, acknowledges that 'the literary imitation of the conventional or experimental techniques employed in the plastic arts [as] pictorial Impressionism is so well transposed that thoughts and feelings pass before our mind's eye as if in the flow of life itself' (Weisstein, quoted in Stevanato, 2012: 131).

In the initial chapter Lily Briscoe looks around on a cold evening in September and views what the landscape presents: 'the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its greenery with purple passion flowers, and rocks

dropping cool cries from the high blue. But something moved, flashed, turned a silver wing in the air' (Woolf, TTL: 15). Then she and Mr Bankes go outside and walk

down the garden in the usual direction [...] to that break in the thick hedge, guarded by red hot poker like brasiers of clear burning coal, between which the blue waters of the bay looked bluer than ever [...] First, the pulse of colour flooded the bay with blue, and the heart expanded with it and the body swam, only the next instant to be checked and chilled by the prickly blackness on the ruffled waves. Then, up behind the great black rock, almost every evening spurted irregularly, so that one had to watch for it and it was a delight when it came, a fountain of white water; and then, while one waited for that, one watched, on the pale semicircular beach, wave after wave shedding again and again smoothly, a film of mother of pearl (Woolf, TTL: 15).



Image 11: Sisley, *Bristol Channel, Evening* (1897)



Descriptions of this kind show how much attention the writer puts on colour and such views indeed recall Impressionist paintings of marine landscapes (images 6, 11), a theme that will be examined further on.

The chromatic effects that characterise Impressionist painting are also present in Woolf's later novel *Between the Acts*, although the writer had developed her style towards new artistic movements, thus embracing Post-Impressionistic and Expressionistic aesthetics, as many critics maintain.

An instance of Impressionist influence would be when the dresses for the play are mixed with the surroundings and their colours merge with nature:

The clothes were strewn on the grass. Cardboard crowns, swords made of silver paper, turbans that were sixpenny dish cloths, lay on the grass or were flung on the bushes. There were pools of red and purple in the shade; flashes of silver in the sun. The dresses attracted the butterflies. Red and silver, blue and yellow gave off warmth and sweetness. Red Admirals gluttonously absorbed richness from dish cloths, cabbage whites drank icy coolness from silver paper. Flitting, tasting, returning, they sampled the colours (Woolf, BA: 336).

Savina Stevanato claims that such 'evanescent and melting quality of colours points to Impressionist effects' (Stevanato, 2012: 130).

A reference to the colourful clothes of the characters appears again further on in the text when '[s]oon the lawns were floating with little moving islands of coloured dresses' (Woolf, BA: 377). Here we may recognise a similarity with Woolf's short story 'Kew Gardens', since in both narratives people are defined as 'patches' of colour, when placed within nature. The similarity between the two texts further heightens when such patches of colours are connected to indefinable voices; in fact, when reading that '[o]ver the tops of the bushes came stray voices, voices without bodies' (Woolf, BA: 377) one is reminded of the '[v]oices. Yes, voices. Wordless voices' (Woolf, 'Kew Gardens', CSF: 89) mentioned at the end of 'Kew Gardens'.

The focus on colours is mostly adopted in the portrayal of landscapes. For instance, in the initial pages of *To the Lighthouse* Mrs Ramsay looks at the quay and sees 'the great plateful of blue water [...] before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them' (Woolf, TTL: 9). Towards the end of the text other views of the landscape featuring the lighthouse are again contemplated:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now – James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry (Woolf, TTL: 138).

In *Between the Acts* similar descriptions of the surroundings are presented: '[i]t was growing dark. Since there were no clouds to trouble the sky, the blue was bluer, the green greener. There was no longer a view' (Woolf, BA: 407). However, since the novel is set in the countryside, the fields, as well as a country landscape on the whole, appear often as a painterly subject: 'The flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again' (Woolf, BA: 338);

See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue. And the trees with their many-tongued much syllabing, their green and yellow leaves hustle us and shuffle us, and bid us, like the starlings, and the rooks, come together, crowd together, to chatter and make merry while the red cow moves forward and the black cow stands still (Woolf, BA: 363).

The countryside was, in fact, another frequent subject of Impressionist canvases and a great amount of works by Pissarro and Sisley are instances of how such landscapes were portrayed (image 12).

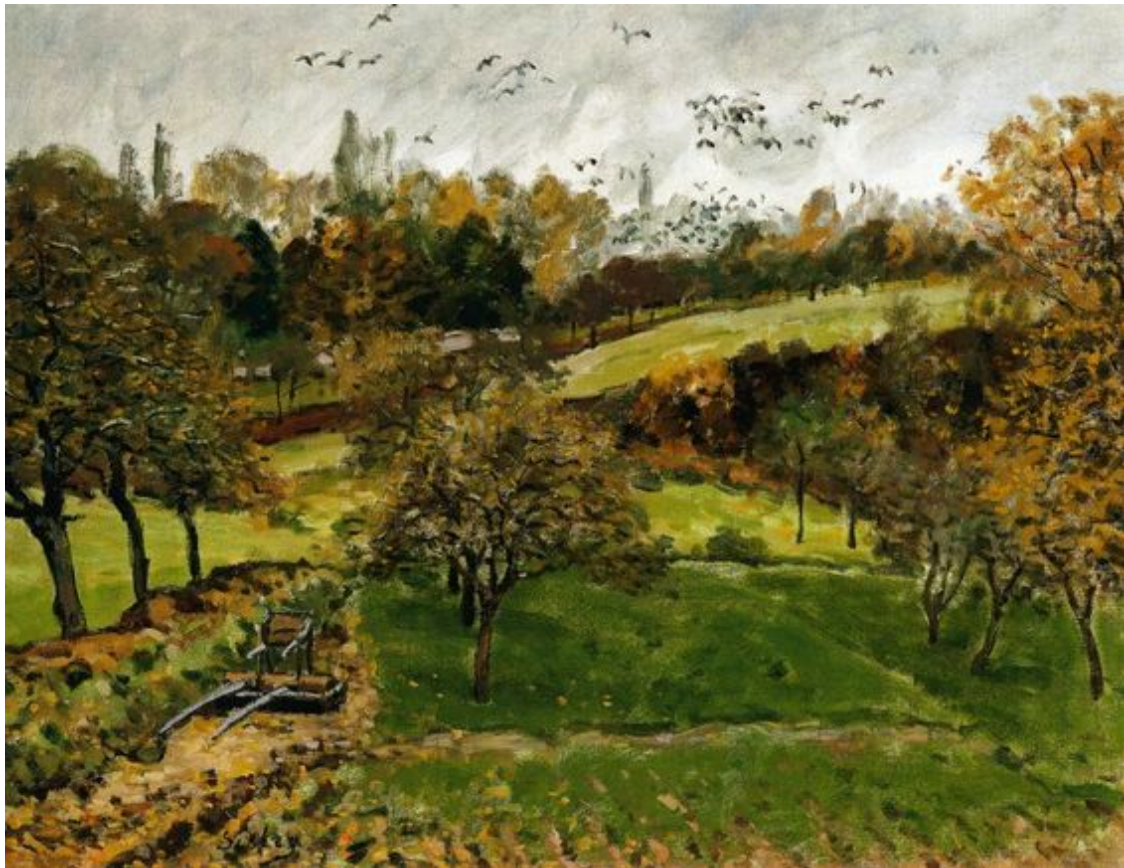


Image 12: Sisley, Autumn Landscape, Louveciennes (c. 1845)

As Savina Stevanato claims, in both novels 'looking at reality sometimes implies framing it, as if it were a picture' (Stevanato, 2012: 177). Indeed, such views are often explicitly compared to visual arts and perceived in painterly terms, thus recalling the connection of what is written with the visual arts.

In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, the painter Lily Briscoe reflects upon how she ought to paint her subjects:

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semitransparent. Then beneath the colour there was the shape (Woolf, TTL: 14).

In this passage not only does the artist consider the various colours she could use, but the reflections of light on them, as well as the issue of shape, are also mentioned. Further on in the chapter, a more detailed analysis of the descriptive use of Impressionist light will be carried out.

In *Between the Acts* readers are faced with Old Olivier's artistic reflections instead: 'over the edge he surveyed the landscape—flowing fields, heath and woods. Framed, they became a picture. Had he been a painter, he would have fixed his easel here, where the country, barred by trees, looked like a picture' (Woolf, BA: 312). Pictures are mentioned several times in this later novel of Woolf. The writer, indeed, openly addresses to works on canvas through her writing. More specifically, three pictures that hang on the walls of the house are actually described within this novel. An instance would be the comment about a painting that is hanging in the kitchen: '[b]ut the lady was a picture. In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence' (Woolf, BA: 323). Through this description, Woolf creates an explicit connection with the realm of painting, not only because she mentions a picture, but also because she refers to the actual work of the painter Sir Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788).

Not only views of nature, but also everyday objects are the subject of paintings. Indeed, some of Woolf's characters are attracted by a beautiful composition of objects that would allow for a still-life treatment. For instance, a beautifully laid dish of fruit on the table rouses Mrs Ramsay's pictorial sense and make her think of an image created by a painter:

Now eight candles were stood down the table, and after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit. What had she done with it, Mrs Ramsay wondered, for Rose's arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea of Neptune's banquet, of the bunch that hangs with the vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus, among the leopard skins and the torches lolloping red and gold (Woolf, TTL: 70).

This description alludes explicitly to the realm of painting as well, since the

reference has been interpreted by critics as recalling either the *Adolescent Bacchus* (c. 1595) by Caravaggio or *Bacchus and Ariadne* (c. 1523) by Titian.

Some pages later Mrs Ramsay again adopts a pictorial way of looking at the dish, with her eyes

going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it—a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing (Woolf, TTL: 78).

*Between the Acts* presents characters with visual sensibility as well. However in this later novel the focus of attention for still life images shifts from fruit bowls to flower pots. Indeed,

Candish paused in the dining-room to move a yellow rose. Yellow, white, carnation red—he placed them. He loved flowers, and arranging them, and placing the green sword or heart shaped leaf that came, fitly, between them. Queerly, he loved them, considering his gambling and drinking. The yellow rose went there. Now all was ready—silver and white, forks and napkins, and in the middle the splashed bowl of variegated roses. So, with one last look, he left the dining-room (Woolf, BA: 322).

Flowers seem to be a subject-matter of great interest for Woolf, as it was for her mother, according to Gillespie (Gillespie, 1988: 252). They certainly prompt the artist's use of vivid colour and the study of painterly compositions. Instances of flowers' colouring are clear in both *Between the Acts* and *To the Lighthouse*: '[s]ee the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue' (Woolf, BA: 363); then 'the lilies, the roses, and clumps of white flowers and bushes of burning green' (Woolf, BA: 405). Whereas in *To the Lighthouse* we read: '[t]hese flowers seemed creditable, Mr Ramsay said, lowering his gaze and noticing something red, something brown' (Woolf, TTL: 48).

Both Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell were 'delighted' by natural objects and they wanted to capture such delight in their works. 'Solid objects like crockery and furniture or perishable ones like fruits, vegetables, and flowers stimulated [...] their imaginations' (Gillespie, 1988: 227). So not only Woolf, but also her sister delivered numerous images of still lives and Virginia actually found inspiration from those for depictions in her own mode of representation. Instances of Vanessa's studies on still life pictures may be her 'Still Life of Pears and Everlasting Flowers' (c. 1945), the 'Still Life with Apples in a Bowl' (c. 1919) or her many floral still lives.



Image 13: Monet, , *Terrasse à Sainte-Adresse* (1866-1867)

Another favoured motif of Impressionist painters was water. Indeed '[t]he Impressionist forerunners, Boudin and Jongkind, were marine painters with an eye for wind, clouds and water' (Stewart, 1982: 244) and Monet, the Impressionist painter par excellence, certainly followed them. He began

painting outdoors – ‘en plein air’ – with Boudin at Le Havre, where he carried out his ‘studies of coastal waters’. Some significant instances of his marine views would be: *Garden at Sainte-Adresse* (1867), *Cliffs near Dieppe* (1882), or *Regatta at Sainte-Adresse* (1867), as well as his renowned *Impression: Sunrise* (1872), the canvas that named the artistic movement. In 1868 the writer Emile Zola wrote about Monet that ‘[w]ith him, water is alive, deep above all real. It laps against the boats with little greenish ripples cut across by white flashes; it spreads out in glaucous pools suddenly ruffled by breeze ... it has dull and lambent tints lit up by broken gleams’ (Zola, quoted in Blunden, 1976: 126).

Virginia Woolf, as well, seems to have followed the lead of marine painters with her coastal studies in *To the Lighthouse*. When Mrs Ramsay goes outside for a walk with Mr Tansley in the early pages of the novel, she stops and looks around, having the view of the bay in front of her:

That was the view, she said, stopping, growing greyer-eyed, that her husband loved. She paused a moment. But now, she said, artists had come here. There indeed, only a few paces off, stood one of them, in Panama hat and yellow boots, seriously, softly, absorbedly, for all that he was watched by ten little boys, with an air of profound contentment on his round red face gazing, and then, when he had gazed, dipping; imbuing the tip of his brush in some soft mound of green or pink. Since Mr Paunceforte had been there, three years before, all the pictures were like that, she said, green and grey, with lemon-coloured sailing-boats, and pink women on the beach (Woolf, TTL: 10).

This description reminds one of the beach-front scenes painted by Impressionists, such as *Le Lavandou* (1859) and *Figures on the Beach* (1890) by Renoir. In each work we see ‘sailing-boats’ in the sea and people on the beach. Some of the women in both paintings have something of the colour pink. The similarity between the painterly and the literary here is a very close one. As Jack F. Stewart maintains, the sea is definitely ‘a favourite motive for painters of light and atmosphere, as it was for Woolf’ (Stewart, 1982: 244).



Image 15: Renoir, *Le Lavandou* (1859)



Image 14: Renoir, 'Figures on the Beach' (1890)



Describing water, to Impressionists, meant something more than focusing on and attempting at rendering the various nuances of colour and the composition of a landscape on canvas. It meant paying attention to the effects of light as well. Monet was definitely fascinated by the 'impalpable and fleeting; the transparency and vibration of air and water' (Blunden, 1976: 133) and those elements fascinated Virginia Woolf too. An interest in the reflections of light upon surfaces as well as in how the changes of light affect colours, both of the surrounding nature and of objects within the household, is therefore another recurrent motif of Impressionism. Indeed, the 'early plein-air Impressionists, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and Sisley, were variously attracted by movements of sunlight over leaves or flesh, river scenes, lights on dark water, cities by night, seascapes, clouds, mist, smoke' (Stewart, 1982: 239).

Certainly, Claude Monet would regularly go to a studio boat on the Seine to paint; there he and Renoir set up their easels next to the other and painted the same motifs, as we are able to notice by comparing their pictures *La Grenouillère* (1896) (image 7 by Monet) and *Sailboats at Argenteuil* (1873-74).

Arnold Hauser explains the Impressionists' fascination with water in his *Social History of Art*:

The representation of light, air, atmosphere, the dissolution of the evenly coloured surface into spots and dabs of colour [...] the play of reflected and illuminated shadows, the quivering, trembling dots and the hasty, loose and abrupt strokes of the brush, the whole improvised technique with its rapid and rough sketching, the fleeting, seemingly careless perception of the object and the brilliant casualness of execution merely express, in the final analysis, that feeling of a stirring, dynamic, constantly changing reality (Hauser, 1999: 111).

Impressionist artists definitely loved contemplating the play of reflections upon moving water and Monet, indeed, devoted his life to the recording of 'the subtlest nuances of changing light' (Stewart, 1982: 261) (image 7). His obsession is especially noticeable in his series of water lilies (images 16, 17).

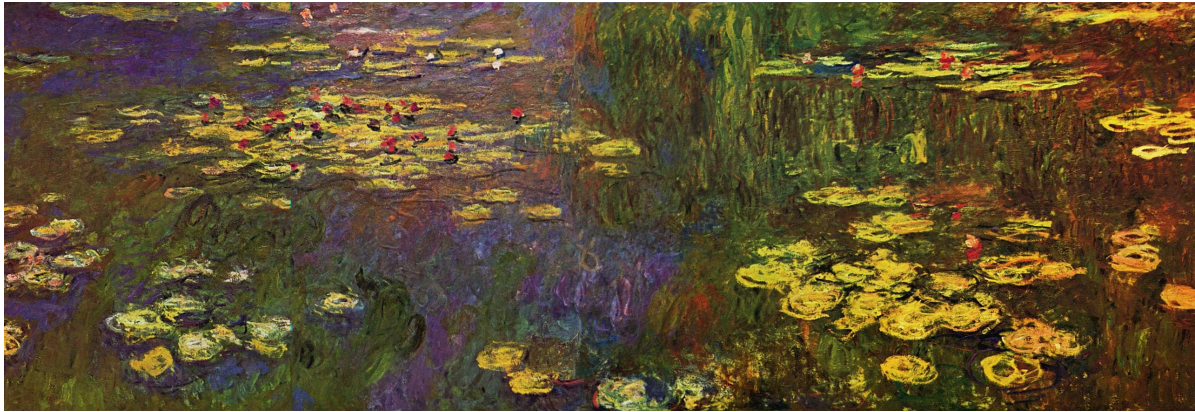


Image 16: Monet, 'Water Lilies' (1920-1926)

In Woolf's writing we may identify a similar focus on the colours of surfaces, as well as on the play of lights and shadows: '[a]nd when he came to the sea the water was quite purple and dark blue, and grey and thick, and no longer so green and yellow' (TTL: 31). Woolf did not adopt painterly terms only in her novels, but examples from her private writings can be found as well. In her diary, Virginia put her words and sensations down on the page as if she were using a brush to paint on a canvas: 'we just had time after printing off a page to reach the river and see everything reflected perfectly straight in the water. The red roof of a house had its own little cloud of red in the river - lights lit on the bridge made long streaks of yellow -' (Woolf, D I: 80-1).

Even though only *To the Lighthouse* is set in a marine environment, also *Between the Acts* contains studies of light reflecting on water. Indeed, an extremely Impressionist subject is variously mentioned in the text and it is examined by paying attention to both colour and light, that is the 'lily pond':

There had always been lilies there, self-sown from wind- dropped seed, floating red and white on the green plates of their leaves. Water, for hundreds of years, had silted down into the hollow, and lay there four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud. Under the thick plate of green water, glazed in their self-centred world, fish swam - gold, splashed with white, streaked with black or silver. Silently they manoeuvred in their water world, poised in the blue patch made by the sky, or shot silently to the edge where the grass, trembling, made a fringe of nodding shadow. On the water-pavement spiders printed their delicate feet. A grain fell

and spiralled down; a petal fell, filled and sank. At that the fleet of boat-shaped bodies paused; poised; equipped; mailed; then with a waver of undulation off they flashed (Woolf, BA: 326-7).

The lily pond could be defined as a synthesis of Impressionism, since flowers, colours, water, light reflections and nature mix together; it is also among the most depicted subjects by Claude Monet, the painter who represents the artistic movement.

Lucy still gazed at the lily pool. [...] her eyes went water searching, looking for fish. The lilies were shutting; the red lily, the white lily, each on its plate of leaf. Above, the air rushed; beneath was water. She stood between two fluidities, caressing her cross. Faith required hours of kneeling in the early morning. Often the delight of the roaming eye seduced her—a sunbeam, a shadow. [...] Then something moved in the water; her favourite fantail. The golden orfe followed. Then she had a glimpse of silver—the great carp himself, who came to the surface so very seldom. They slid on, in and out between the stalks, silver; pink; gold; splashed; streaked; pied. [...] from the grey waters, [...] she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched (Woolf, BA: 402-3).

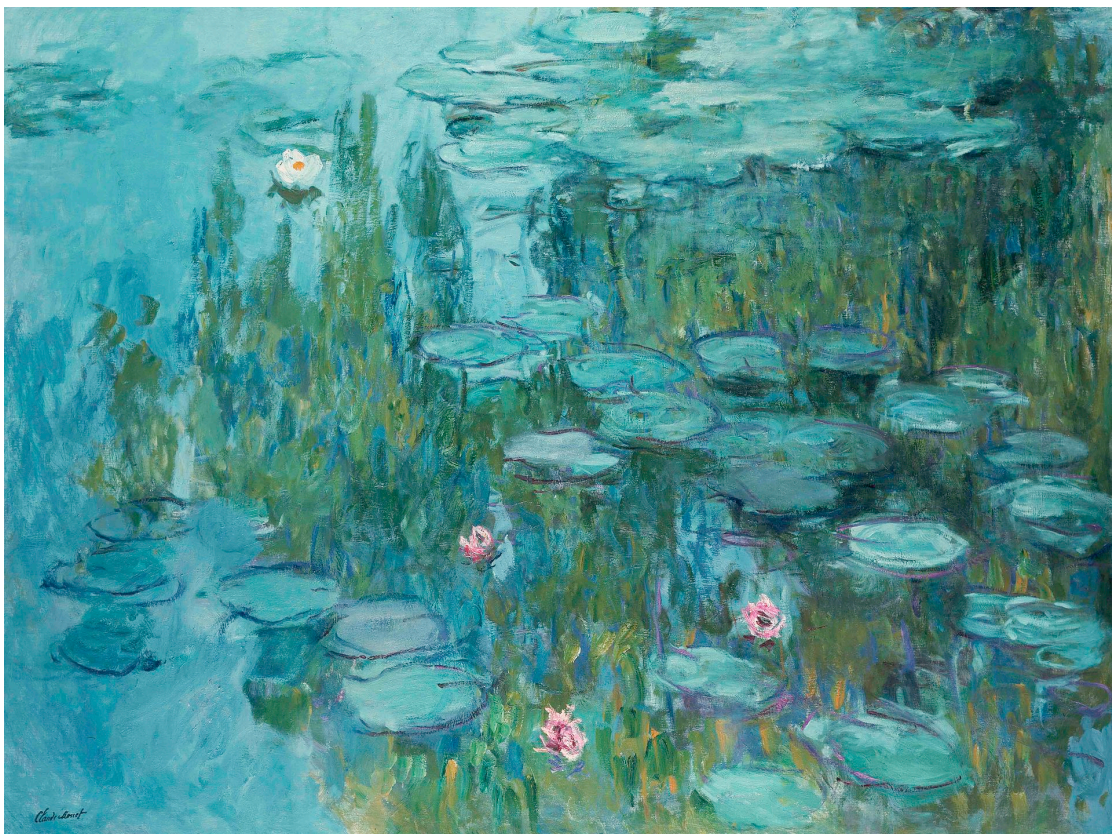


Image 17: Monet, 'Nymphéas' (1915)

Again, a passage on the lilies is reminiscent of the paintings by Monet, of his brushwork, the colours and the luminous reflections. When reading the excerpt, one may visualise the pond with its elements and the image would be very much alike to the pictures from Monet's garden in Giverny (images 16, 17). In addition, both the novel *Between the Acts* and Monet's paintings of water lilies were created during the last period of each artist's life, which heightens the similarity between the works even more. Indeed, the two artists were experimenting with other artistic movements later on in life, thus adding elements of Expressionism and other modern movements into their works.

In both novels by Woolf, moreover, we find various studies on sunlight. Examples can be found in *To the Lighthouse* about the effects of light on the landscape, its reflections on the water but also the impact it has indoors:

The autumn trees gleam in the yellow moonlight, in the light of harvest moons, the light which mellows the energy of labour, and smooths the stubble, and brings the wave lapping blue to the shore (Woolf, TTL: 94-5);

Now, day after day, light turned, like a flower reflected in water, its sharp image on the wall opposite. Only the shadows of the trees, flourishing in the wind, made obeisance on the wall, and for a moment darkened the pool in which light reflected itself (Woolf, TTL: 96);

[T]he sun so striped and barred the rooms and filled them with yellow haze (Woolf, TTL: 99).

Similar studies on sunlight, as well as on the shadows it casts, can be read in *Between the Acts*:

The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling of yellow light (Woolf, BA: 311);

The light but variable breeze, foretold by the weather expert, flapped the yellow curtain, tossing light, then shadow (Woolf, BA: 313).

Descriptions of this kind are characterised by a fragmentary syntax. Sentences are fairly short and present combinations of numerous words with a great use of punctuation. The narration seems to stop its storytelling mode and rather focus on a certain moment, so that the reader can perceive a precise visual sensation. This fragmentation of language is reminiscent of the short brushstrokes that characterise Impressionist artworks. Woolf, therefore, seems to not only acquire the subjects and motifs of Impressionism, but also its techniques of representation.

Finally, a last feature of Impressionism that Virginia Woolf and painters had in common is their engagement to perception and sensations. Just as 'the Impressionists all painted the passing scene [...] the fleeting moment' (Courthion: 28), what captures the artist's eye on the outside corresponds to that process happening within, in which 'the mind receives a myriad impressions' (Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', CE II: 106). Thence, it is not just the writer's use of traditional elements, such as colour and light, Impressionist subjects and semi-transparent visions that make Woolf's narration Impressionist. The writer aims at rendering the Impressionist moment, thus 'the experience that marked the meeting place of the individual, interior self and the outside world' (Smith, 1995: 21). Indeed, Woolf herself wrote in her diary that '[e]very moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions, which have not yet been expressed' (Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', CE II: 229).

Therefore, one could say that Virginia worked not only with visuality, but with her characters' consciousness as well. In her novels, for instance, we find that her characters' experience of pictorial or art objects and views stimulate their imagination, either consciously or subconsciously. Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is, certainly, reminded of a still life painting, when observing a dish of fruit on the table, as well as the vase with roses assembled by Candish in *Between the Acts* does.

Furthermore, descriptive passages of external scenes, followed by passages presenting what is inside the mind of the viewer, are also frequent. In her works Virginia tries to give shape to the impressions - either visual, auditory or physical - that the subjective minds of her characters experience when they interact with the external reality. The following chapter will present an analysis of such visual introspections, which may be addressed to as 'stream of consciousness'.

## 6. Visuality and consciousness

Although Virginia Woolf adopted most of the motifs and subjects of Impressionist paintings, the artistic aim of her descriptions was not to simply be pleasing to the eye. The writer's visuality definitely encompasses more than just a textual embellishment. Woolf did not want to only paint 'with words' and be a 'partial' writer, since '[t]he world is full of cripples at the moment, victims of the art of painting who paint apples, roses, china, pomegranates, tamarinds, and glass jars as well as words can paint them, which is, of course, not very well' (Woolf, 'Pictures', TM: 140). Her aim was to go beyond those paintings. As Edith Wharton claimed, in fact, '[t]he impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house, should always, to the novelist, be an event in the history of a soul' (Wharton, 1953: 293).

In order to do that, Woolf could still follow Impressionist aesthetics, as both Impressionist artists and Virginia attempted to capture the sensations of the viewer. In fact, one could say that such common aim is the last element that connects Woolf's writing to the artistic movement. Not only do we read in Smith's *Impressionism* that being an Impressionist meant rendering 'the sensation produced by that landscape', reproducing 'a scene made on the mind of the painter' (Smith, 1995: 20); but Cezanne himself (even though the painter is famous for his Post-Impressionist artworks, he started out as Impressionist) claimed that 'to paint after nature is not a matter of copying the objective world, it's giving shape to your sensations' (Smith, 1995: 21).

Woolf definitely believed that the eye should 'fertilize' and in 'Pictures' she takes the works of 'Proust, Hardy, Flaubert or Conrad' as an example for writing. 'The whole scene, however solidly and pictorially built up, is always dominated by an emotion which has nothing to do with the eye. But it is the eye that has fertilized their thought; it is the eye, in Proust above all, that has come to the help of the other senses' (Woolf, 'Pictures', TM: 141). The visual becomes, therefore, the carrier of something else.

In her essay 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation', Woolf takes the painter's work as an example of this. Whilst Sickert's painting is initially defined as 'silent land', he is later called 'a true poet', and is said to be 'among the best of biographers. When he sits a man or woman down in front of him he sees the whole of the life that has been lived to make that face. [...] Hence the intimacy that seems to exist in Sickert's pictures between his people and their rooms. The bed, the chest of drawers, the one picture and the vase on the mantelpiece are all expressive of the owner' (Woolf, 'Walter Sickert', CE II: 236).

Diane Gillespie, indeed, acknowledges that '[m]inds in Woolf's fiction are lighted rooms with furniture, dim rooms animated by ambiguous shapes as well as landscapes with mountains, valleys, sliding rivers, deep pools, and cloudy skies' (Gillespie, 1988: 301).

The art critic Roger Fry, commenting on 'The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition', observed that artists 'do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life' (Fry, 1920: 157). Indeed, whereas Manet (a painter belonging to the artistic tradition preceding Impressionism) mainly based his works on what was purely visual, Cézanne attempted at expressing what belongs to the inside, to his inner nature. His works were definitely 'conceived from the data of his inner vision' (Fry, 1952: 9), rather than from observing nature.

Woolf seems to have embraced such aesthetics in her essay 'Modern Fiction', where she points out how writing in the modern era differs from the previous writing tradition. There she defines the modified interest of the writers towards their subject, as well as their aim to record the sensations and impressions experienced by the eye and the mind:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. [...] Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and



incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness (Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' CE II: 106).

This excerpt has been quoted by several scholars, who considered it a proclamation of Virginia's Impressionist aesthetics. In fact, in the essay Woolf opposed the traditional descriptive realism to the way of registering reality that was becoming established between the *fin de siècle* and the early 1900s. Recording 'the experience that marked the meeting place of the individual, interior self and the outside world' (Smith, 1995: 21) was, therefore, not only the job of painters, but also that of writers.

In Gillespie's study on *The Sisters' Arts* we read that both 'Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell delighted not only in everyday objects but also in the relationships between indoor and outdoor spaces and between people and the places they inhabit' (Gillespie, 1988: 267). In fact, Virginia Woolf, did not only capture the external world onto her pages, but she also tried to register the emotional responses of people and characters to such scenes. In Gillespie's study, we further read that '[l]ike certain modern French painters, both [sisters] were interested in light and colour'; however what interested Woolf more was the 'perceiver of colour', rather than the reproduction of 'its minute variations'.

The two sisters had some artistic interests in common, and they used to discuss about their arts and their medium, also exchanging their opinions in letters. In 1910 Vanessa Bell, for instance, wrote to Woolf about her descriptive writing, stating that she preferred Virginia's 'description of humans to those of scenery'. 'But I might have both I think', adds Vanessa, '[a]nyhow those of humans give me a great pleasure and encourage my hopes of you as a novelist' (Bell, quoted in Gillespie, 1988: 276). Vanessa definitely related novel writing with exploring human matters.

In an essay on 'Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights' (1916), Woolf describes how the Bronte sisters used nature 'to describe a state of mind which

could not otherwise be expressed'. Indeed, rather than presenting an accurate description of the surroundings,

[t]hey seized those aspects of the earth which were most akin to what they themselves felt or imputed to their characters, and so their storms, their moors, their lovely spaces of summer weather are not ornaments applied to decorate a dull page [...] - they carry on the emotion and light up the meaning of the book (Woolf, CE I:188).

Such attitude towards writing about nature seems to have been followed by Woolf herself.

Virginia Woolf certainly adopted multiple ways of conveying human feelings and the psyche via nature. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the focus in Woolf's novels can be addressed to certain elements, such as colours, views and landscapes, objects and still life - thus interiors -, and the water of the sea or of garden ponds, as well as reflections of light on all these elements. Indeed, each element may be a conveyor of emotions for the characters of her fiction.

Starting from colours, Woolf was influenced by various personalities, when developing her aesthetics. The philosopher G. E. Moore in 1903 drew a distinction between 'consciousness' and 'the object of consciousness' and explained his theory using the colours blue and green, where 'blue is one object of sensation and green is another, and consciousness, which both sensations have in common, is different from either' (Moore, 1903: 14). What Woolf does with some of her writings is definitely trying to convey a character's consciousness through certain colours. She even uses the same colours 'Blue and Green' (1921) as the title and subject of a short story.

Woolf's interest in colours and in conveying something through them was also heightened by her friendship with painters - among whom was her sister Vanessa - whom she watched applying colours on their canvases. Woolf mocked the artists and their 'furious excitement over their pieces of canvas'

(Woolf, L II: 15), as well as Roger Fry and Vanessa Bell's struggle in determining whether Cezanne had used 'pure paint or mixed; if pure colour: emerald or veridian' in a painting (Woolf, D I: 140), and yet she shared similar concerns about her work.

Virginia often experimented with words, using similes, figures of speech, but also more direct colour words, in order to communicate sensations or variations upon the view. She even used blues and greens as part of the landscape and as emotion carriers. In *Between the Acts*, for instance, '[a] merry little old tune' playing on Miss La Trobe's gramophone asks, 'what pleasure lies in dreaming/ when blue and green's the day?' (Woolf, BA: 365-6). Earlier in *Between the Acts*, the same colours appear, when Bart Olivier, Mrs Swithin and others contemplate the changing weather:

Certainly the weather was variable. It was green in the garden; grey the next. Here came the sun—an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf. Then in compassion it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering. There was a fecklessness, a lack of symmetry and order in the clouds, as they thinned and thickened. Was it their own law, or no law, they obeyed? Some were wisps of white hair merely. One, high up, very distant, had hardened to golden alabaster; was made of immortal marble. Beyond that was blue, pure blue, black blue; blue that had never filtered down; that had escaped registration. It never fell as sun, shadow, or rain upon the world, but disregarded the little coloured ball of earth entirely. No flower felt it; no field; no garden (Woolf, BA: 316).

The colours green and blue are indeed recurrent in Woolf's writing. Here human sentiments such as 'joy' and 'compassion' are addressed to nature. So, not only does nature reflect human emotions, but it also acquires them, making 'flowers', 'fields' and 'gardens' feel.

Green in *To the Lighthouse* is mentioned from the early pages and it is addressed to as 'a grey-green somnolence which embraced them all' (Woolf, TTL: 8). Further on in the novel it appears again, and it introduces the natural elements surrounding Lily Briscoe and arousing sensations within her:

All was silence. Nobody seemed yet to be stirring in the house. She looked at it there sleeping in the early sunlight with its windows green and blue with the reflected leaves. The faint thought she was thinking of Mrs Ramsay seemed in consonance with this quiet house; this smoke; this fine early morning air. Faint and unreal, it was amazingly pure and exciting. She hoped nobody would open the window or come out of the house, but that she might be left alone to go on thinking, to go on painting. (Woolf, TTL: 121)

Towards the ending of the novel, instead, different colours, such as 'red', 'purple' and 'green' are representative of a 'feeling of completeness' for Lily Briscoe:

She seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and float and sink in it, yes, for these waters were unfathomably deep. Into them had spilled so many lives. The Ramsays'; the children's; and all sorts of waifs and strays of things besides. A washer-woman with her basket; a rook, a red-hot poker; the purples and grey-greens of flowers: some common feeling which held the whole together.

It was some such feeling of completeness perhaps which, ten years ago, standing almost where she stood now, had made her say that she must be in love with the place. Love had a thousand shapes (Woolf, TTL: 143).

Colour metaphors acquire such a communicative force that they also help the reader understand the experiences of reading and speaking of the characters in Woolf's novels. Indeed, in *To the Lighthouse* they help expressing Mrs Ramsay's reception of poetry. To her, words appear as 'little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up in the dark of her mind' and when she read 'she felt that she was climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that curved over her, so that she only knew this is white, or this is red. She did not know at first what the words meant at all' (Woolf, TTL: 86). Rather than focusing on the meaning of the poem or on its subject, the woman perceives the colours that the words convey. Similarly, the nurses in *Between the Acts*, while pushing perambulators, talk '- not shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one to another, but rolling words, like sweets on their

tongues; which, as they thinned to transparency, gave off pink, green, and sweetness' (Woolf, BA: 310).

At other times, instead, it is views themselves who speak; in *Between the Acts* the view is representative of what has been said through the gramophone, since the tune played on the gramophone describes an idyllic pastoral evening and then:

The view repeated in its own way what the tune was saying. The sun was sinking; the colours were merging; and the view was saying how after toil men rest from their labours; how coolness comes; reason prevails; and having unharnessed the team from the plough, neighbours dig in cottage gardens and lean over cottage gates.

The cows, making a step forward, then standing still, were saying the same thing to perfection (Woolf, BA: 370).

Another recurrent subject in Woolf's fiction are landscapes and views. As well as Virginia, also her sister Vanessa was fond of landscapes. However Woolf filtered those through the minds of her characters, thus making views communicate the moods and emotions of the viewers. Gillespie, indeed, refers to those whilst acknowledging that Woolf 'creates landscapes of the mind' (Gillespie, 1988: 268).

Mrs Ramsay's blissful emotions in the first chapter of *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, reflect on the view and make the colours of the landscape brighter:

she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (Woolf, TTL: 47)

Waves in the passage indicate both the natural elements rippling the surface of the sea and the thoughts passing across the woman's mind. In Woolf's writing water is, indeed, compared to human minds several times, as will be analysed

further on the chapter.

In the 'Time Passes' section of *To the Lighthouse* the narrative presents various descriptions of interiors, as well as of the natural surroundings of the Ramsay's house. These descriptions introduce feelings that are mostly negative and sad ones, since several elements of the family have died:

[S]oftened and acquiescent, the spring with her bees humming and gnats dancing threw her cloak about her, veiled her eyes, averted her head, and among passing shadows and flights of small rain seemed to have taken upon her a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind.

[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with child-birth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well] (Woolf, TTL: 98-99).

Nature is stepping into spring, a time of the year when natural elements awake from the cold winter and come alive again. Merry activities, such as 'dancing' and signing are, indeed, mentioned. Nonetheless nature is well aware of the sad sensations that apply to humans dealing with death at such a time. In fact, a mention of the many deaths of the Ramsays family members follows.

Towards the ending section of *To the Lighthouse*, when Mr Ramsay and his children are finally sailing towards the lighthouse, Cam's feelings are introduced by and compared to weather and nature:

Cam would never resist tyranny to the death, he [James] thought grimly, watching her face, sad, sulky, yielding. And as sometimes happens when a cloud falls on a green hillside and gravity descends and there among all the surrounding hills is gloom and sorrow, and it seems as if the hills themselves must ponder the fate of the clouded, the darkened, either in pity, or maliciously rejoicing in her dismay: so Cam now felt herself overcast, as she sat there among calm, resolute people and wondered how to answer her father about the puppy; how to resist his entreaty – forgive me, care for me; while James the lawgiver, with the tablets of eternal wisdom laid open on his knee (his hand on the tiller had become symbolical to her), said, Resist him (Woolf, TTL: 125).

Here natural phenomena such as 'clouds fall[ing] on a green hillside' and surrounding the hills in 'gloom' are mixed with human feelings, such as 'sorrow', 'pity' and 'dismay'. By visualising the atmosphere of the landscape described, readers are able to grasp exactly what is going on in Cam's mind and body. Nature, as well as natural views, therefore, seem to both carry and reflect human states.

Woolf sometimes seems to be aiming at disclosing states of mind, rather than states of art through her descriptions:

Now the lawn was empty. The line of the roof, the upright chimneys, rose hard and red against the blue of the evening. The house emerged; the house that had been obliterated. He was damned glad it was over—the scurry and the scuffle, the rouge and the rings. He stooped and raised a peony that had shed its petals. Solitude had come again. And reason and the lamplit paper... . But where was his dog? Chained in a kennel? The little veins swelled with rage on his temples. He whistled. And here, released by Candish, racing across the lawn with a fleck of foam on the nostril, came his dog (Woolf, BA: 402).

Once everyone has left, it is the empty landscape that heightens the sensation of loneliness. Since the crowds have left the place and no longer hide the scene around him, the character is conquered by a sense of 'solitude', which reminds him to call his companion, thus his dog.

Not only does the surrounding nature reflect human emotions, but it can also arouse mental processes. In *Between the Acts*, for instance, looking at natural landscapes and getting lost in the view allows Mrs Swithin to think:

Mrs. Swithin caressed her cross. She gazed vaguely at the view. She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination—one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one. If discordant, producing harmony—if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus—she was smiling benignly [...] Her eyes now rested on the white summit of a cloud (Woolf, BA: 388).

Whereas, in *To the Lighthouse*, on an evening walk Lily Briscoe and William Bankes stop to look at the bay and:

They both smiled, standing there. They both felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves; and then by the swift cutting race of a sailing boat, which, having sliced a curve in the bay, stopped; shivered; let its sails drop down; and then, with a natural instinct to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness – because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest (Woolf, TTL: 15).

The view does not only evoke emotions in the characters, such as ‘sadness’ and ‘merriment’, but they provoke a series of thoughts within their minds. Indeed, Lily thinks – as she often does in the novel – about life and the passing of time, which makes the natural world survive its human presences. However, the same view may remind different things to various characters. In fact,

Looking at the far sand hills, William Bankes thought of Ramsay: thought of a road in Westmorland, thought of Ramsay striding along a road by himself hung round with that solitude which seemed to be his natural air. But this was suddenly interrupted, William Bankes remembered (and this must refer to some actual incident), by a hen, straddling her wings out in protection of a covey of little chicks, upon which Ramsay, stopping, pointed his stick and said "Pretty – pretty," an odd illumination in to his heart, Bankes had thought it, which showed his simplicity, his sympathy with humble things; but it seemed to him as if their friendship had ceased, there, on that stretch of road. After that, Ramsay had married. After that, what with one thing and another, the pulp had gone out of their friendship. Whose fault it was he could not say, only, after a time, repetition had taken the place of newness. It was to repeat that they met. But in this dumb colloquy with the sand dunes he maintained that his affection for Ramsay had in no way diminished; but there, like the body of a young man laid up in peat for a century, with the red fresh on his lips, was his friendship, in its acuteness and reality, laid up across the bay among the sandhills (Woolf, TTL: 15-16).



Whereas the view of the bay and its sand hills makes Lily think about the meaning of life, Mr Bankes is reminded of an episode from his past friendship with Ramsay.

In *Between the Acts* landscapes evoke varied sensations, according to the perceiver, as well. For instance the characters do not perceive the view from Pointz Hall similarly. The scene is unpleasant and boring to Mrs Manresa:

Mrs. Manresa yielded, pitched, plunged, then pulled herself up.

"What a view!" she exclaimed, pretending to dust the ashes of her cigarette, but in truth concealing her yawn. Then she sighed, pretending to express not her own drowsiness, but something connected with what she felt about views.

The flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again. The repetition was senseless, hideous, stupefying (Woolf, BA: 338).

Whereas Mrs Swithin considers the view both 'beautiful' and 'sad': "'That's what makes a view so sad," said Mrs. Swithin, lowering herself into the deck-chair which Giles had brought her. "And so beautiful. It'll be there," she nodded at the strip of gauze laid upon the distant fields, "when we're not" (Woolf, BA: 331).

Finally the Impressionist obsession for watery surfaces also serves Woolf to explore the consciousness of her characters. In both novels the motif of water appears and it does not only fulfil the artistic purpose of admiring the reflection of light upon the surface, but it also reflects human concerns. Indeed, in *To the Lighthouse* human minds are compared to 'mirrors, [...] pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form' (Woolf, TTL: 98).

In the last section of the novel, Cam and James sail to the lighthouse with their father and Cam's internal torment regarding her relationship with the paternal figure is externalised through nature. During the preparation for the sail, as well as during the actual sailing, water is mentioned several times to introduce the thinking of the characters:

The sails flapped over their heads. The water chuckled and slapped the sides of the boat, which drowsed motionless in the sun. Now and then the sails rippled with a little breeze in them, but the ripple ran over them and ceased. The boat made no motion at all. Mr Ramsay sat in the middle of the boat. He would be impatient in a moment, James thought, and Cam thought (Woolf, TTL: 121).

A series of thoughts about Mr Ramsay, running through his children's minds, follow this introduction. By describing the marine landscape, Woolf is creating a path to the inner world of her characters' mind.

Yes, the breeze was freshening. The boat was leaning, the water was sliced sharply and fell away in green cascades, in bubbles, in cataracts. Cam looked down into the foam, into the sea with all its treasure in it, and its speed hypnotised her, and the tie between her and James sagged a little. It slackened a little. She began to think (Woolf, TTL: 123).

Some pages later, the marine elements are again a tool for introspection. In this second watery passage, however, it is looking into the water that prompts Cam's consciousness.

The comparison between seawater and mind is even more closely analysed further on in the narrative, where the sea swirls 'as her mind' does:

They don't feel a thing there, Cam thought, looking at the shore, which, rising and falling, became steadily more distant and more peaceful. Her hand cut a trail in the sea, as her mind made the green swirls and streaks into patterns and, numbed and shrouded, wandered in imagination in that underworld of waters where the pearls stuck in clusters to white sprays, where in the green light a change came over one's entire mind and one's body shone half transparent enveloped in a green cloak (Woolf, TTL: 136).

The water here seems to be working similarly to Cam's mind. By looking at the sea, Cam is indeed able to drown herself in a sea of thoughts.

In *Between the Acts* there isn't as much evidence of the analogy between pools and minds, however an example is striking: Mrs Swithin who leans over the lily pool and contemplates. Mentioned earlier, as for its colours and light

reflections upon the watery surface, now the fact that the lily pond passage reflects Lucy Swithin's consciousness is highlighted:

Lucy still gazed at the lily pool. "All gone," she murmured, "under the leaves." Scared by shadows passing, the fish had withdrawn. She gazed at the water. Perfunctorily she caressed her cross. But her eyes went water searching, looking for fish. [...]—She stood between two fluidities, caressing her cross. Faith required hours of kneeling in the early morning. [...]

"Bart ... " She spoke to him. She had meant to ask him about the dragon-fly—couldn't the blue thread settle, if we destroyed it here, then there? But he had gone into the house. [...]

"Ourselves," she murmured. And retrieving some glint of faith from the grey waters, hopefully, without much help from reason, she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves (Woolf, BA: 402-3).

In *Between the Acts* examples of 'mirrors' as representing characters' minds are more present:

[Mrs. Giles Oliver] She lifted it and stood in front of the three-folded mirror, so that she could see three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face; and also, outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops.

Inside the glass, in her eyes, she saw what she had felt overnight for the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer. "In love," was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes, was the other love; love for her husband, the stock-broker—"The father of my children," she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table (Woolf, BA: 312).

The passage clearly shows how, when looking in the mirror, one can access those inner sentiments that are not externalised. Mrs Giles Oliver definitely keeps her love for the farmer only to her inner self, in so much that '[i]t was a shock to find, after the morning's look in the glass, and the arrow of desire shot through her last night by the gentleman farmer, how much she felt when he came in, not a dapper city gent, but a cricketer, of love; and of hate' (Woolf, BA:

328). This state of mind – that is only visible through a looking-glass – is, indeed, so well concealed to the external world that it surprises Mrs Olivier, when it appears.

A further instance can be read later in the text, when Mrs Swithin's inner emotion is accessible to William only through the mirror: '[s]tanding by the cupboard in the corner he saw her reflected in the glass. Cut off from their bodies, their eyes smiled, their bodiless eyes, at their eyes in the glass' (Woolf, BA: 340). Finally, Mrs Swithin ends the play by pointing various mirrors towards the audience; it is by looking at themselves through the glass that people manage to grasp the deeper meaning of the show and of life.

Gillespie observes that '[a]lthough Vanessa did not want to deal, in her art, with the muddles of the human psyche, she valued the striking images which perception imprinted upon her own brain and tried to capture them with her visual vocabulary, just as her sister tried to capture in words her own perceptions or those of her characters' (Gillespie, 1988: 284). Virginia certainly did not confine herself to capturing the inner life of characters either. Nonetheless, readers frequently come across moments of consciousness in her fiction. Characters' responses to the outside world still have an important role in the narrative, in fact, they may allow readers to understand better their states of mind.

Woolf started experimenting with the relationship between views and characters early on in her writing. Indeed, in an early essay in 1906 the writer talked of landscapes as if they were portraits. She thought that landscapes should be easy to paint: 'the sitter reclines perpetually in an attitude of complete repose outside the drawing room windows; he is there whenever you want him; he submits to any amount of scrutiny and analysis; and, moreover, there is no need to trouble about his soul' (Woolf, 'Pictures of Places', 1986: 124-27). However, she concluded, words fail the task, since landscapes 'are complex, filled with associations for each viewer' (Gillespie, 1988: 274).

The visual arts were definitely an essential element in the work of Virginia Woolf. She, indeed, believed that the visual form could reveal 'something unvisual beneath'; 'Mercifully these pictures [...] expand my consciousness' (Woolf, *The Waves*, 2000: 86-7) she wrote. In the visual idiom Woolf certainly found the images and a vocabulary to express her character's states of mind, the 'essence of reality' (Woolf, D I: 113). It is often a visual stimulus, such as a landscape or an art object (frequently perceived so by the character) that prompts a series of thoughts and emotions in a character's mind. Moreover, as the previous analysis showed, it is at times through the description of surrounding elements that the sensations of the characters can be explained and externalised; one could even say that many of the pictures in Woolf's texts would not exist without her characters' consciousness. Jack Stewart seems to have summed up her style when he commented that, '[a]s a writer, she aims to render the feel of life in a given consciousness at a given moment, through the language of sense perception that parallels that of paint' (Stewart, 1982: 238).

## Conclusions

When one thinks about Virginia Woolf, one immediately thinks about Modernism. She was indeed a pioneer of English Modernism and she was among its most active and famous members. Woolf was involved in the change affecting the new century and was concerned, as well as her contemporaries were, with the form that the novel should take to represent the different, modified reality of the twentieth century.

Although she was a writer, much has been debated about her engagement not only with literature, but also with pictorial art. Her writing was not limited to novels or short stories, but she was also a prolific critic and essayist, since Woolf took part in the whole cultural debate of the early 1900s. Her writing definitely served to explore and analyse the writer's concerns about literature, its forms and its means, but also the influence of the visual arts upon it. Virginia, indeed, relied on the visual arts – starting from the movements of the late nineteenth century - and their aesthetic theories for the development of her style.

A great portion of Woolf's writing career was definitely dedicated to the exploration of the parallels between verbal and visual arts, as well as to finding out how to bring the two together. Painting and literature were not only the subject and art of her fiction, but also of her critical essays and private diary, as it is clear from chapter 2 and 3. However, it was not only Woolf who relied on visuality, but many *fin-de-siècle* writers adopted the visual at the service of their writing. Indeed, a whole generation of artists took painterly techniques as example and model for viewing and perceiving, as well as reproducing, the surrounding environment.

Her unresolved attitude towards the two media and their reciprocal relationship is explicative of Woolf's acute understanding of the limits of language, which led the writer to believe that the world of painting can express more 'complete and flawless statements of life' (Woolf, 'Walter Sickert', CE II:

236).

A relevant artistic movement in the development of the writer's aesthetics was certainly Impressionism. Most of the movement's motifs are present in Woolf's whole writing, in both public and private, fictional and essayistic, earlier and later texts. In fact, her childhood fascination with colours seems to have heightened her interest towards Impressionist artworks. The other elements, such as studies of light, the natural landscapes with fields and seas and artistic compositions of objects are often present as well. Furthermore, these elements often stimulate trains of thought within her characters' minds. Indeed, even though Woolf frequently employed aesthetics from the visual arts, she did not aim at a decorative use of her writing - thus at simply producing a painting with words. Painterly techniques rather served the writer to better convey her ideas and worldviews.

Woolf derived important aspects for her style from the theories of Impressionism. However, she was aware of other contemporary artistic movements and of those following Impressionism; in fact, her aesthetics derived various aspects from diverse movements. Critics have certainly identified the evolution of Woolf's writing as following a parallel progression of the evolution of the visual arts. Yet, in chapter 5 it becomes clear that elements of Impressionism are not only an early influence to Woolf, but they never abandon her aesthetics - in fact, they affect her later writings as well. Rather than a progressive evolution, one may notice that her fiction adopts diverse elements from the succeeding movements and makes them work together.

Virginia's fascination with anything visual was presented in chapter 2, which made it clear why she chose Impressionism as the preferred method of representation. In fact, to her personal interests, the influence of her artist friends also added up. The Bloomsbury group has proved to be very important in her work, especially her friendship with Roger Fry and her sister. However, Woolf tried to communicate something more through words, that is the

experience of reality. Starting from the Impressionist conception that artworks served to capture an impression of life in a given moment, Woolf wanted to capture the subject sensations of her characters by presenting descriptions that have been filtered through their minds. Recording the Impressionist moment seems to be Virginia's way of correcting the extremely descriptive method of the Edwardian writers - such as 'Mr Wells', 'Mr Bennett', 'Mr Galsworthy' - that she so criticised in 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown'. Whereas they focused merely on external reality, Woolf looked into the human mind.

Writers in the Modern era were definitely prompted to focus their interest differently from their predecessors. However, writers were not only influenced by the visual arts; scientific and philosophical discoveries certainly played a major part in this change. In 'the late nineteenth and early twentieth century scientists and natural philosophers set about appropriating visible and invisible worlds through new technologies of vision such as photography, stereoscopes, X-rays' (Humm, 2002: 3); personalities such as Freud in psychology, Einstein with his theory of relativity, Bergson with his modified conception of time, Nietzsche and his philosophy of perspectivism, as well as William James, introducing the idea of 'stream of consciousness', among others, are worth being mentioned. These new discoveries and theories did not only affect but also challenged artists and writers of the time, since they offered new ways of seeing, as well as of expressing, reality.

Indeed, as Deborah Parsons acknowledges, in the early twentieth century a 'shift in the metaphysics of space and time that pervaded scientific, philosophical and cultural discourse' took place. It soon spread across 'the broader popular imagination' and posed 'questions about the nature of the universe and the human subject within it' (Parsons, 2007: 131). Science seemed to have joined art in the revolution of portraying modern reality, creating a need for artists to take into account new variables.

In fact, the characters in Woolf's fiction are often caught contemplating a



scene or a view. Whereas at times they look at things in a painterly way - such as it happened with the still lives reported in chapter 5 -, at other times they appear absent, as if they were detached from the surroundings and observe the outside in a disinterested way. It is on such occasions that the reader gets to access their minds. These deep introspections are connected to the 'kingdom of silence', and thus to the visual, since they are prompted by an image.

The focus of modern novels, as well as of paintings, was therefore opposed to that of the traditional realistic art from the previous century. In her essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' Woolf lamented that Edwardian writers 'have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature' (Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', CE I: 330); so 'the Georgian writer had to begin by throwing away the method that was in use' (Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', CE I: 332) and to re-evaluate their aesthetics.

Writers who focused on visuality, like Woolf, maintained a preoccupation with how impressions and emotions affect personal viewpoints. As Peter Stowell claims,

Literary impressionists were interested in the impalpable surfaces of sensory data that attack consciousness. This transliteration [from artistic to literary impressionism] meant that their subjects were not the water, snow, blossoms, clouds, sailboats, crowds, steam, speed, and mist of the painters. Instead, the writers found equally ephemeral subjects: love, jealousy, growing up and growing old, daydreams, sleeplessness, modern warfare, and the myriad emotions and intrigues of changing human relationships (Stowell, 1980: 49).

Indeed, what started out as a new way of representing the environment within the arts, turned into a representation of how such environment affected its viewers. A revolutionary writing style that mixed the external experience with the internal-psychological one, was definitely making its way in the twentieth century.

Virginia Woolf spent her life trying to create a technique that would express her philosophy and worldview at its best. In order to do so, she had to borrow from parallel arts. The writer definitely struggled to incorporate the strengths of painting into the novel, without abandoning the motives of her own medium. As explained in chapter 2, in fact, Woolf felt that the world of paint could sometimes express more freely and more completely what she thought difficult to convey through words. Mares, indeed, notes in his essay that Woolf belongs to those writers drawn to 'the becalmed world of visual arrangement' as they assume that it is 'the painter who has developed the only feasible relationship of the sole man to the mute universe. The painter's works cling to its dimension, the visual, and share in its muteness' (Mares, 1989: 335).

All in all, the influence of the visual arts is evident both in her writing style and in her worldview. Although Virginia Woolf was interested in quotidian and natural subjects, as well as in colours and light, that does not suffice to define her works as Impressionist. She was aware of Impressionism, as well as of the previous and subsequent artistic developments both in the French and the English scene. Her writing is demonstrative of the many influences that acted upon Woolf's aesthetics, even though the focus of this analysis was Impressionism. Indeed, various passages in Woolf's writing remind one of the Impressionists (as certain paintings by her sister do), whereas other passages and paintings indicate other interests.

Virginia Woolf moved from an Impressionist style, characterising her early works, towards a Post-Impressionist one, more evident in her later writing. Her artist friends - most of all her sister and Roger Fry - definitely adapted to the changing artistic movements and later preferred Post-Impressionism, which established in the artistic scene starting from the early 1900s. Whereas Fry initially appreciated the human element of experience that Impressionism pursued, later on he criticised its 'pseudoscientific and analytic' method.

The Post-Impressionist movement certainly developed out of the earlier Impressionism, however some of its aesthetics changed. A different worldview and the conception of how a scene ought to be represented were the main variations within the movement. Roger Fry, indeed, claimed that Post-Impressionist artists looked 'at objects only as part of a whole field of vision [...] Every solid object is subject to the play of light and shade, and becomes a mosaic of visual patches, each of which for the artist is related to other visual patches in the surroundings' (Fry, 1920: 34).

Virginia Woolf's late novel *Between the Acts* apparently belongs to such technique of representation. In fact, it presents various scenes and groups of people, which appear separated but which all together create the public watching a pageant in the country. As Flavio Gregori writes, when painting, Cézanne tried to break volumes and almost refused the unity of the subjects on the canvas (Gregori, 2001: 134). Woolf, too tried to break the content of her later novels down in groups. Nonetheless, she never completely abandoned the aesthetics of her early writing and elements of Impressionism are evident in her late works as well.

What is worth noticing from her visual insights into consciousness, its association with the realm of painting and the various parallels that she drew between the visual arts and her own, however, is how Virginia was capable of transforming her use of aesthetic theories and visual arts into literary use, as well as of bringing together the world of painting and that of literature.

The connection between words and images is not always explicit in Woolf's work. In her earlier texts it is more immediate and easier to define. In the 'Kew Gardens' story Woolf was definitely experimenting directly with colours and visual effects, whereas in *To the Lighthouse*, art form and its aesthetics of expression were the focus of the narrative through the painter protagonist Lily Briscoe. However, even in the other novel, belonging to a later period - a more distant one from her early experimentation with visuality - a

strong connection with the visual art is present. Nancy Bazin, indeed, maintains that *Between the Acts* is representative of the writer's lifelong struggle to achieve an art novel. Readers, she argues, are able to 'see' the play in terms of colours and patterns, that means in the same way as if they were looking at a painting (Bazin, 1973: 220-1).

All in all, one could say that the world of the visual was essential to Woolf. It is, in fact, through her friendships with painters and through the adoption of a painterly worldview, that Woolf managed to find a way to express herself, as well as to portray the reality around her. The language of painting definitely becomes her preferred language for writing.

As David Dowling claims, painting seems to offer 'the most common analogy for her career and aspirations as a writer' (Dowling, 1985: 95).

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