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**Rachel Vinrace and *The Voyage Out*:
A Heroine Out of Time and Out of Place**

Introduction

Rachel Vinrace is a heroine out of time and out of place in Virginia Woolf's novel *The Voyage Out*. Previous critics have explained Rachel as a heroine disengaged from the world (Ruotolo), a heroine in a failed bildungsroman (Ruotolo, Friedman), a heroine in a transformed bildungsroman (Froula, Blain), or a character bound in Woolf's literary allusions about impending death (Davis-Clapper). All these theories are credible. While I agree with the previous critics, I go a step further and examine Rachel from the point of view that she is in addition a character **out of time and out of place in her world, and that because of her inability to fit in, death is the only solution .**

Rachel as an out of time, out of place heroine does not fit into her surroundings emotionally, physically, or intellectually. She is not like the other characters, she feels apart from them and they sense this, she does not communicate well with them, and she has intense aversions to what her contemporaries consider the normal life for a young woman. She is not avant garde, but neither is she a character of a previous time. Her early development is suppressed (Lee 677), her education is incomplete and based on irrelevancies, and she doesn't have a clear vision of a future that is meaningful. Woolf very systematically places Rachel opposite characters that are in time and in place, and in the end Woolf has no choice but to write Rachel's death because Rachel never finds the time or place where she fits in.

To understand Rachel as an out of time, out of place character she must first be understood in the context of Virginia Woolf's own life both before and during the time she wrote the novel. In addition it is important to see Rachel as other critics see her, and also to see Rachel within the text of the novel. Examples in the text where Rachel is seen as an out of time and out of place character will focus in this study on scenes on board the *Euphrosene*, at the dance party at the hotel, and during Rachel's and Terence's walk in the jungle, although other scenes could be used as well. In addition, an examination of some of the abundant literary and historical allusions will enhance the explanation of the out of time, out of place nature of Rachel's character.

The out of time and out of place analysis can also be viewed as a semantic answer to the question, "**The voyage out where?**" Rachel's voyage is a voyage out of time and out of place to death.

Virginia Woolf and *The Voyage Out*

Virginia Woolf may even be viewed as **a writer out of time and out of place**. Rachel is somewhat like Woolf, and some critics say the novel and especially its predecessor, *Melymbrosia*, are autobiographical (Hussey 332). In addition, DeSalvo and Heine focus on studying rewritings and *Melymbrosia*, on finding autobiographical links to Virginia Woolf and on her "process of the literary creation" (332).

Lee describes Woolf's life when she wrote this novel in the "pre-war years [as being] circumscribed by her vulnerable mental states, which kept pace with the long rewriting of *The Voyage Out*" (266.) Woolf undoubtedly felt she was out of time and out of place in several periods in her own life, which ended in her suicide, the ultimate statement of one who feels out of place in the most extreme sense.

In addition, Woolf noted that she herself was on a journey where she couldn't find a completely comfortable destination. She wrote "I sometimes feel surprised . . . when I

realize that we all set out on our journey, as human beings, with all our ceremonies and marriages” (Lee 232). Woolf’s life journey was in many ways like Rachel’s journey. In analyzing Woolf’s letter, Lee stated that in her many rewritings of the novel, Woolf attributed the strangeness she herself felt to Rachel (266).

Ruotolo observes that little in Woolf’s life remained stable for very long. Woolf’s own voyage allowed her to create in her first novel, a heroine who “has failed to take heed of proper models” (13) and thus did not fit in in the same sense, perhaps, as Woolf herself did not fit in. Hussey also points out that “the story of the evolution of Woolf’s first novel is complex and uncertain (332) which suggests Woolf’s instability during the writing of the novel.

The problem of an out of time, out of place heroine was not new to Virginia Woolf or to the feminist writers who preceded her (and probably not to those who followed her either), although those exact words may not have been used to describe their inability to fit in. Lyndall Gordon says, “Virginia Stephen launched herself on a problem passed on by George Eliot in whose heroines she saw ‘the ancient consciousness of woman. . . for so many ages dumb’ brim with ‘a demand for something – they scarcely know what – for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence.’” Gordon further states that “Rachel Vinrace cannot take a novelistic place in English society; she cannot survive. . . . there is no knowing what Rachel could be because she evolves in a way that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of existence” (92). Like Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on The Floss*, Rachel Vinrace is a heroine who can’t grasp a future. Both characters are out of time and out of place in their respective novels; neither are like the other girls and women in their novels - from their childhoods to their untimely deaths. And both novels are failed or transformed bildungsromans.

More Than a Failed or Transformed Bildungsroman

In providing explanations of Rachel’s character and the novel itself, previous critics see *The Voyage Out* as a reversed bildungsroman with a disengaged heroine

(Ruotolo), a failed bildungsroman (Friedman), or even as a transformed bildungsroman (Froula). Whichever bildungsroman view one might prefer, all explanations fit well with Rachel as a character out of time and out of place.

Ruotolo says, “If Rachel learns anything in the course of a lifetime, it is the art of disengagement. . . “(31). In the beginning of the ocean voyage Rachel is described “sitting in her room doing absolutely nothing” (31). Throughout the voyage, Rachel is described as isolated and inactive. Early in the novel Rachel is described in comparison to other women as “outside their world and motherless” (58). This early description provides very strong support for the out of time and out of place description of Rachel. What could be more outcast and pathetic than a motherless child?

Ruotolo goes even further and says that the usual format of the bildungsroman is reversed, and Woolf’s heroine is a girl “who will not grow into the world as it is constituted” (21). This disengaged heroine separates herself from others and relies on her music as a substitute. The narrator in the novel says, “To feel anything strongly was to create an abyss between oneself and others. . . . Let these odd men and women . . . be symbols, - featureless, but dignified symbols. . . . It appeared that nobody ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked a feeling they felt, but that was what [Rachel’s] music was for” (35).

Another instance of Rachel’s disengagement occurs when she prepares to meet the other voyagers for dinner on the first night of the journey. The narrator says “. . . the ringing of the great bell found [Rachel] sitting on the edge of her berth in such a position that the little glass above the washstand reflected her head and shoulders. In the glass she wore an expression of tense melancholy” (39). Furthermore, during the dinner Rachel “did not take part in the talk; no one had spoken to her; but she had listened to every word that was said” (45, 46) and afterwards “Rachel followed in the wake of the matrons, as if in a trance” (46) until she returns to her room and more thoughts of *Tristan and Isolde* (47). Rachel observes the social world on board ship, but does not fit in.

Even at the dance party later on in the novel, the guests and Helen and St. John talk about Rachel behind her back, pointing out her inability to fit in (176) and her lack of education and inability to find permanence in life (182). This conversation takes place while the dancers swirl and the music plays. The general impression is one of social movement from which Rachel is alienated.

Rachel observes that “the general effect of the music to which [the guests] had danced so gaily was one of passionate regret for dead love and the innocent years of youth; dreadful sorrows had always separated the dancers from their past happiness” (185). During a time of gaiety for others, Rachel is melancholy. Even her inner mood is out of synch with the moods of the others. After Rachel is persuaded to play the piano, she begins with dance music that is familiar to her and then goes on to classical music. When the dancers tell her she is not playing *their* familiar dance music (again she is out of time and out of place), she replies, “Invent the steps. . . This is the dance for people who don’t know how to dance!” (185).

Providing another slant on the bildungsroman theme, Friedman says, “In relation to ideological scripts of female destiny in the nineteenth-century women’s bildungsroman, *The Voyage Out* kills off the traditional life story of upper middle-class British women and thus accomplishes a victory of sorts” and although “readers may anticipate the end, [they] nonetheless feel cheated out of the narrative resolution that the text insistently leads us to expect by invoking the conventions of the bildungsroman” (109). Using this scenario, Rachel is also out of time and out of place.

Rachel is not like the other women in *The Voyage Out*, and Woolf goes to great lengths to provide contrasts between her and the many other women characters in the novel who do fit into the traditional mold (Susan, Mrs. Dalloway) and even to women who don’t fit the traditional mold, but manage to find a suitable time and place for themselves (Evelyn, Mrs. Flushing). Rachel has had a sheltered upbringing and childhood, she is unschooled in social ways, she feels out of place with the older women, and she is

unlike the younger women close to her own age. The other women, and Helen in particular, want Rachel to fit in, but neither they nor she can accomplish that. Friedman's explanation echoes the sentiments of the characters themselves, and this is seen particularly as they adjust to Rachel's death and move on with their own lives at the end of the novel.

In another interpretation of what happened to the bildungsroman, Froula comments “. . . the existence of Woolf's later female artist-novels enables us to interpret her representation of female initiation and female authority in *The Voyage Out* not as an ultimate failure but as a challenging and transforming critique” (137). This is perhaps the most optimistic view of what happened to the bildungsroman. And the out of time and out of place analysis of Rachel fits this theory as well.

Rachel's tutoring by Helen and conversations with Mrs. Dalloway suggest a turning point and the possibility of awakenings, friendships, and enlightenment for Rachel, and hint that maybe Rachel *will* fulfill the bildungsroman, or at least be transformed. On the other hand, the conversations with Mrs. Dalloway also set her up for the conversations with Mr. Dalloway and the kiss which further complicate the bildungsroman and foreshadow the tragic ending through Rachel's dreams.

The scene where readers know beyond a doubt that the story is a failed bildungsroman is the scene where Rachel and Terence go into the jungle together. When they begin their conversation it isn't a conversation of mutual understanding. The two repeat the stilted phrases “We love each other” and “We are happy together” (316), yet they never use the first person pronouns and they never speak directly to each other. There is a pause in the conversation, and Rachel finally says, “Terrible – terrible” and thinks “as much of the persistent churning of the water as of her own feeling.” Terence has tears running down his cheeks and Rachel's skin turns white and she appears tired (317). The entire love scene is an ordeal for them both, and at this point they are both out

of time and out of place. This is emphasized by the fact that they are lost and cannot find the way back.

When Rachel and Terence eventually find themselves on the right path again, “like the drive in an English forestThey walked on in silence as people walking in their sleep” (318). The declarations of love were made in an alien environment between two people who could not communicate with each other. Once they are back with the group, Mr. Flushing asks, “Well, was it worth the effort?” (318). Neither Rachel nor Terence reply directly, but only comment that it was hot. Rachel and Terence are not a good fit for each other. They are out of place with each other, and the romance is doomed. The transformation that Froula describes finally occurs during the death scene when Rachel and Terence at last become simpatico. For Rachel, however, this pushes her further out of time and out of place to her death.

The Settings Out of Time and Place

Woolf places Rachel throughout the novel in settings, which intensify Rachel’s inability to fit in. In her introduction, Lorna Sage says, “*The Voyage Out* is openly nostalgic for a past when the world looked new. The crossing to South America provides a pretext for imagining Elizabethan voyagers in the new world, back at the wide-eyed, heroic beginnings of colonial history” (xx). The voyage itself is the first out of time, out of place setting and a major backdrop for the novel. All the characters are being transported on a voyage that is compared to voyages in history. Woolf carefully sets up the voyage to South America, an exotic and mysterious destination, as a voyage of discovery. However, the voyage and the discovery become a tragedy for Rachel as she becomes entrapped in setting after setting where she does not fit.

Through Woolf’s use of settings, Rachel is not only figuratively but also literally out of time and out of place by the end of the novel. Woolf goes to great lengths to place Rachel in specific and varied settings where she does not fit, from the sea voyage (including the wildly out of place kiss and the storm) to the jungle trip (including the out

of place walk with Terence where the two actually get lost). Hussey points out that in a letter to Lytton Strachey about *The Voyage Out*, Woolf writes that she tried “to give the feeling of a vast tumult of life, as various and disorderly as possible, which should be cut short for a moment by the death, and go on again – and the whole was to have a sort of pattern, and be somehow controlled” (Hussey 339). Each setting is disorderly for Rachel. She is differentiated and alienated in these settings. The only time and place where she is completely assimilated is in her death at the end of the story. And, of course, death is really not a place after all and time has run out.

Descriptions of the beginning hours of the sea voyage on the *Euphrosyne* are dark and foreboding rather than festive as one might expect a holiday voyage to begin. As Rachel sets the table and prepares to be her father’s hostess, she overhears a man saying, “On a dark night one would fall down these stairs head foremost” and a woman’s voice adds, “And be killed” (9). When the ship takes off it is described as giving “a loud melancholy moan” (11).

The ship proceeds past London, which in contrast to the darkness of the river, is “a swarm of lights with a pale yellow canopy drooping above it. There were the lights of the great theatres, the lights of the long streets, lights that indicated huge squares of domestic comfort, lights that hung high in the air. No darkness would ever settle upon those lamps, as no darkness had settled upon them for hundreds of years. It seemed dreadful that the town should blaze for ever in the same spot; dreadful at least to people going away to adventure upon the sea. . .” (12, 13). In addition to the darkness, the wind is blowing “rough and chilly” (13) and Rachel eventually leaves her first social encounter with her fellow passengers and says, “I’m going out to t-t-triumph in the wind” (19), a rather pathetic comment. Rachel is in an alien place and she meets the inhospitable setting head on and alone in the first chapter.

Not only does the narrator provide a dreadful description of the beginning of the voyage with the descriptions of darkness, the sound of sirens hooting in the river, and a

juxtaposition of day and night and the tranquil with the tumultuous (20), but also we learn that Rachel is “like her [dead] mother, as the image in a pool on a still, summer’s day is like the vivid flushed face that hangs over it” (21). The motherless child image is inextricably woven into the alien setting. In addition, the commentary here provides a foreshadowing of tragedy yet to come.

The climax of the sea voyage encompasses the storm, the kiss, and Rachel’s dream. All three are hostile settings for Rachel. The storm is also an inhospitable setting for the other characters, but Rachel alone faces the violence and mystery of Mr. Dalloway’s kiss, and the horror of her dream. The sea voyage ends with Rachel’s “Visions of a great river, now blue, now yellow in the tropical sun and crossed by bright birds, now white in the moon, now deep in shade with moving trees and canoes sliding out from the tangle banks. . .” (93). This description provides a link between the setting of the sea voyage to the setting of the river voyage that is yet to occur.

Another setting which shows Rachel as an out of time, out of place character is at the dance at the hotel. Woolf describes the dining room where the dance is held as a “farmyard scattered with grain on which bright pigeons kept descending” (168), and she describes the dancers as “rats who followed the piper” (169). These unpleasant descriptions set the scene for the arrival of Rachel and Helen. When they arrive they stand apart and outside from the dance party observing, and Helen says “We are suffering the tortures of the damned.” Rachel replies, “This is my idea of hell.” (170). The setting is most unpleasant and alien to Rachel.

A very important setting where Rachel is out of time and out of place the crucial scene where Rachel and Terence go into the jungle together. The narrator repeats the earlier observations of “the time of Elizabeth” (308) and describes the river “swirling past in the darkness” (309), thus linking the first voyage to the second through allusions and darkness. The setting is inhospitable: “As they moved on the country grew wilder and wilder” (311). As the group progresses, Terence and Rachel both feel as if they are

waiting for something and are drawn on together (312). In contrast St. John and Helen find the jungle beautiful, and the other river travelers busy themselves. “Terence and Rachel [are] left standing by themselves without occupation” (321). On this voyage as well as on the sea voyage, Rachel is again observed doing nothing. She and Terence walk into the jungle together, and as they leave, St. John warns them to, “Beware of snakes” (315).

As Rachel and Terence walk, the jungle is described in sights and sounds as being filled with eerie noises, smells, and strangely colored light (315). “Terence and Rachel hardly spoke. Not only did the silence weigh upon them, but they were both unable to frame any thoughts” (316). Rachel and Terence, the two young lovers, cannot communicate. At this point, Terence picks up and throws a red fruit, and instead of eating the fruit, Terence throws it in the air and it falls to the ground with a thud. Rachel is out of time and out of place with Terence. The thud of the fruit is also the thud of the romance and the end of the bildungsroman.

Literary Allusions

Another frequent theme in critical literature about *The Voyage Out* is the explanation and examination of Woolf’s abundant literary allusions. Hussey says, “The densely allusive character of *The Voyage Out* has encouraged readings that see the plot and setting of the novel as influenced by Woolf’s own reading” (338). Davis-Clapper tells us that we find “directly stated allusions to 88 different historical figures and 40 figures from mythology and literature; the titles of 50 creative works; and 30 quotations from external works. About 100 different explicit allusions draw Rachel Vinrace’s character” and that “. . . many of these allusions link love and marriage with death, and that Woolf reshapes allusions as she composes text” (225).

This use of allusions also allows Woolf to shape Rachel in a world set apart from the usual venues of young women. It allows Woolf to align Rachel with Woolf’s own

education and to artificially make Rachel more at home with the historical past, the fictional, and the literary and mythological rather than with the real. What Rachel learns from literature and history provides her view of the world more than what she learns from life does. The allusions further enhance Rachel as an out of time and out of place character by placing her within the context of the allusions and by separating her from the more conventional women in the novel.

Woolf begins the literary and historic allusions early in the novel, and continues this technique throughout the book. The allusions are distracting because they almost jump out of the text and draw the reader's attention from the main story. The allusions are themselves out of time and out of place. They set Rachel apart from the story.

In one of the first allusions early in the sea voyage, Rachel attempts a conversation with Mr. Pepper about a book he is reading. He gives her a lecture about Greek and Roman roads which concludes with a denunciation of contemporary English roads. This allusion links Rachel's voyage, which has already been linked to Elizabethan sea voyages, to Greek and Roman land voyages (22). The comparison does not quite fit, and is both out of time and out of place, and it provides a skewed allusion for Rachel. This example is the first of Rachel's many encounters with men who read books about the past and try to educate her. Although Rachel and Mr. Pepper talk, they do not communicate well, and the conversation about Greek and Roman roads is about as out of time and out of place as one could be on an ocean voyage.

In another example, Rachel reads *Who's Who* with Helen and is "turning the pages and reading biographies of bankers, writers, clergymen, sailors, surgeons, judges . . . ; what clubs they belonged to, where they lived, what games they played, and how many acres they owned" (89). Rachel's knowledge of people is acquired through books rather than through personal contact. Helen tries to teach Rachel, but her instruction is based in books rather than in life.

Later in the novel Rachel has a conversation with St. John who admonishes her for her sex, her lack of education, and her upbringing, and suggests that she read Gibbon (172) for her education. This is another example of a literary and historical allusion which places Rachel in an inert historical setting rather than a vibrant contemporary setting.

When Rachel is confronted, uncomfortable, and alienated she turns to her music. Woolf's musical allusions provide outstanding examples of Rachel as a character out of time and out of place. Recurring allusions are made to *Tristan and Isolde*, the story of unfulfilled love, which clearly foreshadow what is to happen to Rachel and Terence. Rachel finds a place in her music, however, the music is from earlier classical composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Purcell (59). In the scene where she plays for the dancers, the hour is late, and people drift away from the party. "Rachel, though robbed of her audience, had gone on playing to herself. From John Peel she passed to Bach. . ." (187).

Finally, Rachel and Helen walk home after the dance escorted by Terence and St. John, and the narrator tells us that Mr. Ambrose has been reading ancient Greek all night (he is in his own time and place) while the others were at the party. Woolf can't resist having at least one of the characters enmeshed in the world of allusions while the real action takes place! When asked by Helen how she feels about life after attending the party, Rachel replies, "I feel like a fish at the bottom of the sea" (189). Rachel, despite the apparent success of the evening, is still out of time and out of place.

A heavily Biblical allusion to Adam and Eve and their paradise plays a major part in Rachel's and Terence's walk into the jungle (318). But Rachel is out of time and out of place here as well. Unlike Adam and Eve, Rachel and Terence are unable to communicate, they are lost, the setting is hostile, and the scene ends with a thud.

Time and Place In Woolf's Other Novels

Virginia Woolf uses time and place in her other novels as well, although each novel has a different twist to the time and place motif. Time and place in *Mrs. Dalloway*

literally cover one day in specific London locations, although the characters think and talk about other times and places. Time and place in *To The Lighthouse* are well defined in the first and last parts, but the middle part is more fluid. *Orlando* spans centuries and continents with one main character. The main plot of *The Waves* is about the passage of time within specific places. Woolf's use of time in her novels is reminiscent of the way Salvador Dali paints clocks. The main image is traditional, but something is always skewed or twisted in an unusual manner. Time and place are manipulated, adjusted, and redefined just as Dali's dripping clocks are skewed in their settings.

Conclusion: A Voyage Out of Time and Out of Place to Death

Virginia Woolf's story about a heroine who is out of time and out of place must end with that heroine's death. Any other ending would not sustain the literary integrity of the novel. In giving Rachel the characteristics of a character out of time and out of place, Woolf gives her an almost timeless quality. The timeless, placeless quality is emphasized in her relationships with other characters, in the many settings of the novel, and through the constant allusions literature and history. Rachel simply does not fit in, and Woolf does not give her an opportunity to find any time or place where she does fit. Rachel's voyage takes her away from time and place, and by the end of the novel, she becomes **literally** out of time and place, and she dies. Hers is a voyage out of time and out of place to death.

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