

VOICE OF WATER:

a verse play

by

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A MASTER'S REPORT

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Preface to
Voice of Water

a verse play submitted as a Master's Report in Creative Writing

by

Shelagh Stromberg

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PREFACE

Part I: The Choice of subject

For many Americans, any reference to Virginia Woolf calls to mind Edward Albee's play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Although there is little, if any, connection between Albee's play and the life and work of Virginia Woolf, I feel that for some, at least, the popularization of her name in this way, and with certain connotations ("the big bad wolf," combined with the well-known facts of Virginia Woolf's periods of insanity and her eventual suicide), could lead to a conception of the British author as humourless, elitist, militant, uncompromising, indeed someone to be "feared." While any of these labels might be applied to her in a given moment or context, and they were, to stop there is to overlook the enormous wealth of wit, tenacity, deep caring and aesthetic fidelity that emerges from her creative, critical, and personal writings. In my play, Voice of Water, I hope to balance the portrait of Virginia Woolf by showing the light as well as the dark, and the interplay between the two which characterises her life and work.

After an investigation into the life of Virginia Woolf, it very soon became clear to me that the meeting of a gifted and unusual spirit with historical time, place, and prevailing attitudes can be the very stuff of "tragedy" in all its traditional force--ritualistic, noble,

cyclical, sacrificial, regenerative, and affirmative. The moment a protagonist becomes aware of the difference between his inner values and external reality, and chooses to struggle, there is drama. And if the struggle engages the total being and descends from the ontological level of creativity to that of actual survival, then there is the strongest potential for true tragedy.

I intend to show in my play Voice of Water something of that drama of a real person's life--Virginia Woolf's-- and how she draws on that material for the art which survives her. It was a life full of the conflicts and obstacles that make for such rich material, but which exacted a high price.

It becomes easier to comprehend how deeply some of her conflicts ran if one sees her life as a bridge between the Victorian world, on the one hand, and the twentieth-century absurdist world on the other. Virginia Woolf was caught between the highly moralistic, imperialistic, and class-conscious values of the late nineteenth century, and the tremendous upsurge of iconoclastic energy that came in with the French Post-Impressionist artists and the phenomenon of the new spirit of inquiry taking place among the bright young men of Cambridge, of whom her brother Thoby was one. She was thus faced with being a young woman whose own intelligence perceived and deplored the gross inequalities in the education of men and women; whose own wit forbade her to rely on any but her own evaluation of the political or literary state of affairs;

whose aesthetic sensibilities led her to search for beauty and meaning in a world full of the ugly effects of industrialisation and the mass destruction of two world wars. She was also faced, at an early age, with the death of her mother, and, more importantly, the death of her brother Thoby. These losses gave her a sense of the value and fragility of life, but they also overwhelmed her at times with a sense of futility. This latter state of mind, as she describes it in her diary entries, seems very akin to that which Albert Camus explores in his book The Myth of Sisyphus, an important work on the question of suicide as it relates to this absurdist sensibility.

In her biography of Virginia Woolf, Monique Nathan traces the tensions and conflicts that characterise the life and work of Virginia Woolf: "This conjunction of paradoxes", writes Nathan, "is what illumines the entire body of her work, written 'between the acts' of a tragedy that is beyond her, a work free but doomed, 'like a moth dancing over a bonfire--consumed in less than a second'".

In addition to these human conflicts, Virginia Woolf also wrestled with those of the artist. She took her work very seriously, disciplining herself to write a certain number of hours every day, and working and reworking the material until all redundancies and explanations were hewn from the word or the image. It was, for her, a process of letting down her net into the deepest waters and waiting-- a frightening process in some ways in that it meant facing those subconscious operations that

human beings so often deny or repress, and facing "the void," (one's net does sometimes come up empty) and learning to abide the time until conditions were right again. "Conditions" were often not right: her increasing fame encroached more and more upon her time and privacy; her severe headaches and depressions got in the way --sometimes for months at a time-- and, then, there was the time she willingly devoted to her family and friends. But it was the overwhelming sense of time running out that seemed to affect her most, both in her moments of energy and in her moments of paralysis.

Virginia Woolf's life, then, contains much of the stuff of drama, and while she herself chose the medium of the novel in which to work, it is evident from her reading and critical work that she was much drawn to poetry and drama, and would have worked in these forms had she not also had the conviction that, of the three genres, the novel was the youngest and most plastic of forms for a woman to work. And it is important that this not be understood as a conviction on her part that women are lesser writers, but simply that, looking realistically at history, she realised that women have not had the centuries of grounding in rhetoric, metrics, and classical education, nor the societal approval that goes into the production of these higher forms.

In addition to the personal and artistic struggles of Virginia Woolf, I intend for my play to deal with some of those same issues of her time-- war, morality, societal and individual self-determination, and

what it means to be a woman in a world still predominantly ordered and administered by men. Writing a play, or any original work, is a way of exploring such issues, whether or not one arrives at any conclusion. The writing of this particular play, with its concomitant meeting with Virginia Woolf's own mind, has led me to beware the danger of didacticism and prejudice, and it has been my intention to remain true to the question rather than to the answer, if I am to raise the material out of its historical context and give it that timeless quality essential to a good work of art.

Finally, it has been my intention to show that, in spite of the overwhelming sense of the meaninglessness of her life that Virginia Woolf evidently felt at times, there is a great deal that she has given us in the shape of her finished work and in her "notes towards the definition of a life" that can be discerned in various memoirs and biographies written by friends and relatives. The many references to her wit, kindness, good humour, and sheer sense of mischief and irreverence are a delightful counteraction to the darker side. I believe that these qualities raised her struggle to the level of nobility that is the mark of true tragedy. It is not the divorce between laughter and tears, but their proximity that generates the most powerfully affecting language and action. After she drowned herself in the River Ouse in Sussex in 1941, her hat and stick were found on the banks where she loved to walk. It was not until some weeks later that her body was found. But she left behind a great deal more than a hat and a stick, themselves symbols of that fundamental division within

her. If my play maintains anything, it maintains that there is no need to be afraid of Virginia Woolf.

Part II: Dramatic technique

In turning to the actual writing of my play, I found myself up against the first problem of any writer: what is the subject? Then, does the subject suggest the form, or the form the subject? I began by thinking in terms of form, into which I would attempt to pour autobiographical material (mindful of the injunction to "write what you know"). This is a beginner's mistake, this remarkable ability to forget that the greatest dramas of all time are practically always built around stories handed down through history and mythology and are therefore already well-known. The Greek dramas used Homer, the Elizabethans used the chronicles, the dramas of Corneille and Racine borrowed again both the forms and the stories of classical drama, and the best drama of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often treats of well-known historical or mythological personages or events.

I needed, then, a story or a person, since plot is at one and the same time the most difficult and the easiest part of constructing a play. It seemed more natural to begin with a character, since that would obviate the dangers of being too autobiographical and also give me the immediate sense of voice, emotion, attitudes, and most importantly, drive that I needed. It would ground and focus all the wanderings about

amongst "ideas," "situations," and "theatrical images" that seem to be the wooded area of a playwright's landscape.

I have already explained why I found Virginia Woolf such a good subject, so it remained, then, to pitch in and see what could be done in terms of a drama based on her life. This inevitably led to reviewing her fiction, most notably Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Orlando and The Waves. I then went on to her essays, particularly the book that was the result of her lectures on women and fiction that she gave at Cambridge, A Room of One's Own. I then read her only play-- a whimsical, expressionistic comedy entitled Freshwater that was published in 1976. I was intrigued by my discovery that, amongst other things, the Bloomsbury Circle had had a lively interest in drama to the point of founding a society for its promotion, for which they wrote original scripts, (Freshwater was one of them), and mounted their own performances. Then I turned to Virginia Woolf's Diary, which contains a record of her problems and successes as a professional writer, as well as fascinating comments on other authors, and the people and events that made up her daily life. Finally, I turned to biographies of her-- most notably the one written by her nephew, Quentin Bell, and another written by the French author, Monique Nathan. In addition, I read books on the Bloomsbury Circle, and on the artistic and philosophical ferment of the twenties and thirties in England.

I was overwhelmed with the quantity of lively material on which to draw, and with the gallery of interesting characters that played an

an important role in Virginia Woolf's life. It was here that I met the most difficult of my architectonic problems--how much cloth to cut, what details to select, what period of time, how many characters, which particular events? My only resource was to go back to the "seed" and keep reminding myself of why I chose to write about Virginia Woolf and what it was at the heart of her struggle. If I had two hours in which to show what, in fact, took 59 years to live, there was certainly going to have to be intense distillation. To select, then, was essential. And if drama requires conflict, then it would be essential to show the conflict in her life by selecting those moments that best represent her overall drive and the principal obstacles to that drive.

My next large area of difficulty in composing the play had to do with language. I wanted to write a verse play because it struck me that Virginia Woolf's language is highly poetic. A good deal has been written about poetic drama, but perhaps one of the most important exponents in this particular matter is T. S. Eliot, for he speaks with a twentieth-century viewpoint, and from the experience of having written verse drama himself. He came to it after having published and become famous as a poet, and it seemed to him a natural step to turn to drama. The result of his first attempt was Murder in the Cathedral, a play that has had considerable success but about which he himself had reservations, especially regarding the matter of language:

As for versification, I was only aware at this stage that the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare, for I

was persuaded that the primary failure of nineteenth-century poets when they wrote for the theatre (and most of the greatest English poets had tried their hand at drama) was not in their theatrical technique, but in their dramatic language; and that this was due largely to their limitation to a strict blank verse which, after extensive use for non-dramatic poetry, had lost the flexibility which blank verse must have if it is to give the effect of conversation.¹

T. S. Eliot tried to solve this problem by reviving the versification of Everyman, thereby avoiding excess of iambic, and mixing in some alliteration and occasional unexpected rhyme. He concluded that it worked fairly well for this particular kind of religious drama, and it helped him to avoid what needed to be avoided; but he believed that he had not solved the heart of the problem, which is to present contemporary speech in verse. The language of a play has to accomplish many purposes at one and the same time: portray character, advance the action, give the illusion of authentic dialogue, and, finally, as T. S. Eliot puts it, "leave the audience with a sense that 'I could talk poetry too!'"

There are innumerable books on dramatic technique, and different sets of terminology for the process and the production of plays. However, it seemed best for me to go to the works of the great dramatists and to analyse the strengths (and weaknesses) of their plays. For this purpose I selected a handful of plays, each of which had something

to contribute to my understanding of the composition of a viable dramatic piece. These plays are Sophocles' Oedipus the King, (ca. 427 B. C.), Shakespeare's Hamlet (ca. 1601), T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral (1935), Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1952), and Archibald MacLeish's This Music Crept by me Upon the Waters (1953).

Sophocles' Oedipus the King is a good play to study in order to understand the principles of tragedy as Aristotle discusses them in the notes he left that were subsequently assembled into his book The Poetics. Here he attempts to get at the heart of dramaturgy, especially of tragedy, and offers a definition of tragedy that drew much from the actual tragedies that Aristotle must have seen. His definition, then, might be taken as inductive rather than deductive, but it has nevertheless been the basis for western dramatic theory for so these many centuries: "Tragedy, then, is the imitation of a good action which is complete and of a certain length, by means of language made pleasing for each part separately; it relies in its various elements not on narrative but on acting; through pity and fear it achieves the purgation (catharsis) of such emotions."² Aristotle goes on to delineate the six aspects of tragedy; plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and music, and then proceeds to elaborate on each of these aspects. It is the earliest and most substantial analysis of dramatic technique that the western world has inherited, and whether a play might choose to adhere to the principles or depart from them, its influence in shaping the drama of today cannot be denied.

When I came to look at Shakespeare's Hamlet, I was interested in how an English playwright met the problems of dramatic technique. It soon became apparent that, while there was a considerable departure from the Aristotelian principles here, as well as some possibly inherent structural weaknesses (there is considerable debate about this in the criticism), it could not be denied that this is a great and successful play. Perhaps it owes its greatness to the fact that it is a drama of doubt and hesitation, and is thus the obverse of heroic, classical drama based essentially on action. But it owes its greatness more to the extreme flexibility of language that Shakespeare had achieved by this time, bending the iambic pentameter to every conceivable dramatic moment or character.

Since T. S. Eliot was aware of the dangers of imitating Shakespeare, I thought it useful to look at Murder in the Cathedral to see just how a twentieth-century author went about recreating the drama of a twelfth-century figure--Thomas a Becket--and yet managed to make it a contemporary play. I have already discussed T. S. Eliot's own views on this play, but it was in looking at the text itself that I began to see how he managed to revive the political and religious issues of the time, and how, through his language, he made them twentieth-century concerns. T. S. Eliot relies for the most part on extremely simple language, concrete imagery, frequent repetition of key words, deliberate inclusion of a twentieth-century vocabulary, and the use of the Brechtian "verfremdungseffekt" in the

direct challenge of the knights to the audience. Quite apart from these various techniques, I found it useful to study Eliot's play, which was written during Virginia Woolf's own most productive period, for the language of her time.

Moving on to more recent work, I looked at Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot in order to see how the absurdist tradition, set in motion by the philosophical work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, translated itself into the medium of the theatre. Virginia Woolf suffered a good deal from that same "angst" which characterises the work of dramatists such as Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter and Albee. Here, I found that "Theatre of the Absurd" might be characterised either by the themes treated in the plays, or, more directly, demonstrated by the form itself. Beckett is a playwright who moved more in the direction of using the play to demonstrate the absurdity and illogicality of contemporary living, although Waiting for Godot still manages to rise to moments of profoundly moving language interspersed between the five-hundred pauses that have made silence articulate in recent theatre. It was from Beckett that I began to see the possibilities of blending the timeless movements of the human soul with the latest expressionistic devices--disembodied voices, sets that are stripped to a few suggestive details, and so on.

In Archibald MacLeish's This Music Crept by me upon the Waters I had the chance to see what a recent American poet has added to the evolution of verse drama. This is a highly effective philosophical play exploring the nature of the relationships among a sophisticated

group of people. It has the dignity and academic quality of the verse plays of T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry, but goes beyond them, I feel, in breaking up the lengthy monologues of those former plays, adding an intensity in the rapid exchange of brief dialogue and extreme simplicity of language.

My study of these plays, along with going to as many productions of other plays as possible, has helped to give me the sense of the essential difference between drama and the two other genres--fiction and poetry. Drama is performed as well as enjoyed as a written text. I do not expect to be able to realise all that I have learned from the study of these plays, but by steeping myself in the medium, I hope to have picked up some sense of what viable drama is, and allow these various influences to feed into the stream that I am directing through Voice of Water.

Footnotes

¹ T. S. Eliot, "Poetry and Drama," in Playwrights on Playwriting, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 252.

² Aristotle, On Poetry and Style, trans. G. M. A. Grube (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1958), p. 12

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VOICE OF WATER

a verse play in two acts

by

Shelagh Stromberg

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Virginia Woolf

The Angel in the House

Vita

Thoby, her brother

Leonard, her husband

Roger

Duncan

Lytton

Saxon

Angelica

The Cambridge women

The action takes place in a house on Bloomsbury Square in London during the '20s, then moves to Monk's House in Sussex, finishing in the 40s.

Synopsis of Scenes

Act I

- Sc. i. Between "Old V" and a very youthful Virginia.
- Sc. ii. Struggle with the "Angel in the House".
- Sc. iii. The lecture to the Cambridge women.
- Sc. iv. A "Thursday Evening" with the Bloomsberries.

Act II

- Sc. i. In the garden at Monk's House.
- Sc. ii. The same.

Act I: sc. 1.

SETTING: April. London of the 60s. A house overlooking a square with grass, trees, bordered by a railing. Distant roar of traffic. Bells of Big Ben mark time. Lights up on a room with a tall Georgian window overlooking the square. There is an old woman sitting in an armchair. At first she looks like any old lady, lost in the past, dreaming, maybe sleeping. She appears angular, ugly, immobile. But gradually the increasing light reveals an interesting woman in an artistic outfit, jewelry, a large hat. She has her hand clasped on a walking stick. She looks up brightly, mischievously, and from her first remarks we know that this is a lively, humourous, attractive and intelligent woman of letters.

(Big Ben strikes 2 o'clock)

OLD VIRGINIA

Well, am I old? Am I ugly?

No, don't tell me yet.

You're still on the outside.

On a rainy afternoon in London

The lighting's bad, you know.

It doesn't show me up well, either.

Anonymous crowds under black umbrellas,

Everywhere in Leicester Square,

in Charing Cross Road,
Black umbrellas bobbing and bobbing,
And a brown sky, old and ugly.
Isn't it so, my dear?
You waited a long time, in this queue
In that queue, and at a compulsory stop, too,
But the buses splashed by
perfectly indifferent to the wrinkled puddles
and the bobbing brollies,
leaving you on the outside.
Now that is old and ugly!
But you were coming to see me
and you were afraid,
were you not?
"She is 89 now" you thought,
and stood hesitating a long time
at the doorbell.

(doorbell rings)
But now you're here--Virginia,
coming in.
I assure you, I do not bite.
I will not jab with my stick.
I will not fling you aside
with my hat.
Never.

(enter, tentatively, a very young Virginia Woolf, 1890s dress, cricket ball in hand)

The worst I may do is talk,
my dear, talk.

All those words, all those words!

Written, spoken, underlined,
crossed out, unsaid!

And written again.

Come here, my dear.

One can always speak one's female mind
with one's mothertongue.

Let the men buy, sell, govern or battle
over land, we still inherit speech.

But this is your season of silence,
is it not?

You look, and your questions are packed
down tight, like seeds in a box.

Your eyes draw the nails, break the seals,
but your tongue stays mute
as an unclattered bell.

(Big Ben strikes three o'clock)

Ah, yes , I know!

You have already remarked

that my hat is rakish, but suits
the length of my face;
you feel the varnished turns
in my walking stick without touching it,
you know the coolness of these stones
around my neck.
Come here, my child.

(takes ball from her hand)

Virginia, "the domon-bowler",
they called you.
"But is it proper for a young lady?"
they'll whisper and giggle.

(she stands, fingering the ball expertly,
looks at one point as if she will send it
straight through the window,)

Bowl it straight and hard, Jinny,
straight and hard.
In your skirts, too, if you have to.
This is your vision you are sending
ahead of you. Straight and hard...

(Big Ben strikes 3:30)

Well, well, one puts away childish things.

(she places the ball on the desk, and
picks up a large stiff-covered notebook)

Your diary.

Ah, you wrote it for me.

I was the only one you really
wrote it for, my dear.

And you're right, it's not your best
prose, was never meant to be.

But there's a glint of gold in the dust here.
(reads)

"If Virginia Woolf, at a grand old age
sits down to build her memoirs
out of these books, and is unable
to make a phrase as it should be made,
I can only condole with her
and remind her of the existence
of the fireplace,
where she has my leave to burn
these pages to so many black films
with red eyes in them.
But how I envy the task I am
preparing for her!

There is none I should like better."

Then you were not afraid to be "old and ugly",
no, my dear.

It is when one has begun down the stretch
and your hair is already grey
that such fears come in.

Yet one is never old and ugly.

But how were you to know that?

Then?

You left the lists too soon, Jinny,
too soon.

And they said that all that was found
was the hat on the water
and the stick on the bank,
or...was it, the stick on the water
and the hat on the bank?

One forgets, one forgets
because it does not matter.

All that was left
was a hat and a stick.

But they forgot about the vanity
of hats and sticks,
and the difference, my dear,
between a hat and a stick.

You see, I cannot jab with a hat

and I cannot settle on the summer roses
with a stick.

I planted my stick
where measurement was needed,
and the hat?

Wearing one's state, wearing one's female
state out of memory.

Under its shade in the garden
you drift with the blue butterflies
and laugh with your friends
Leonard, Lytton, Nessa, Vita,
Roger, Dincan, Clive.

(Big Ben strikes 4 o'clock)

Time passes, time rises and gathers
and falls and rises.

Yes, you must speak, Virginis.

Laugh, and speak and write

and stay still, waiting,

gathering your skirts

to spring up and say

"Here, this is my life,

this is what I want to give you"--

(she hands over the ball)
and you deliver the ball
of all those words and phrases
for the flux of our lives,
the teacups and wheelbarrows,
and potted plants and soap
and sponges, and letters
and postcards and hats and walking sticks
of our lives--
all flashing and wet like treasures
from the sea--
oh, there is so much to say
and so much that goes unsaid,
and you are mute, Jinny,
you are mute,
but your hands are noting the weight
and spin of that ball,
and your eyes take in everything
and your ears are cocked, listening
and your nose is to the ground
already, like a labrador retriever.
Take pen in hand and begin.
You can only begin.
You've invented me already.

I'm not about to be whisked away.

So, young lady, you had better
account for yourself.

(Big Ben striking 5 o'clock, lights dim)

Time is dissolving, the waves are mounting
to fan out into speech,
to bring us back from our deep dark sleep
of water
back to the world of here in the voice
of water.

DIMOUT

Act I: sc. ii.

SETTING: same room as in scene i. Virginia is sitting at a desk by the window overlooking the square, writing. At first the scene is dimly lit with fluid watery lights, and the voice of Old Virginia is heard, echoing as in a room much larger. When the voice stops, the watery lights fade and more constant bright lights come up on the scene, revealing it to be a sunny morning in Spring.

VOICE OF OLD VIRGINIA

Now, Virginia, you are launched.
You have been paid for your first article,
a cheque for ten shillings and sixpence.
And you did not spend it on rent
or shoes or the butcher's bills--
you went out and bought a beautiful Persian cat.
I highly approve.
That is a highbrow move, my dear,
genuinely highbrow--not snobbish
as some will be wont to think.
We writers are a different breed,
and not always pedigree,
I readily confess it,
but a different breed.
But all of that brought you face to face

with your first great struggle,
 with the shadow that fell across your paper
 and held you back from writing
 for a better reason than money;
 ah, yes! the Angel in the House,
 what a locked combat.
 But you won that one, Virginia!
 You won that one...

(The flashing water lights fade as the voice fades, and the bright
 lights come up on the set. Virginia dashes a smoked cigarette into
 the ashtray, and takes to chewing a pencil, crossing out some
 writing she is doing, starting over, pausing in frustration)

VIRGINIA

(now aged about 25 years)

There are no obstacles to my being
 a writer, are there?

What do I need?

Some ink, some paper.

With a few shillings

I can buy enough paper and ink
 to write all the plays of Shakespeare--
 if I had a mind to.

I don't have a mind to, just now.

A review will do.

A review will do.

(Pause. She lights up another cigarette.

Big Ben begins tolling the hours)

Then I need time, yes (bong)

some time (bong)

That can be arranged, however,

no obstacle (bong)

an hour slipped in (bong)

here or there (bong)

between folding the linen (bong)

and serving the sandwiches (bong)

between watering the roses (bong)

and scaling the fish (bong)

No obstacles then.

Dip the pen, kick the flanks,

we're off across the field

to measure the impact of a new event.

here--

the publication of a book called Ulysses

by a man called Mr. James Joyce.

(At this point a rustling is heard in the shadows, and we begin to see the figure of an angel approaching the window and the light. A spot comes up on the angel, revealing her to be of a sickly pink and lilac hue like those of sentimental Victorian literature)

VIRGINIA

(continuing with her review)

About this book called Ulysses.

Now, quite frankly...

(The angel interrupts her at this point,
pointing to her paper and speaking very
sweetly)

ANGEL

My dear, a woman does not speak "frankly"--

That is a man's expression.

And privilege.

You must be delicate, subtle, charming...

(Virginia looks at her worriedly, somewhat
timidly in fact. Takes a deep draw on her
cigarette, reflects momentarily, gazing out
of the window, then she scratches out the line
she just wrote)

VIRGINIA

(writing)

"One is amused, stimulated, charmed..."

ANGEL

Yes, yes, that is better.

(the angel advances further into the light,
casting a shadow across Virginia's desk and
papers)

ANGEL

Remember, you are writing about a book
that has been written by a man.
Be sympathetic; be tender;
flatter; deceive;
use all the arts and wiles of our sex,
never let anybody guess
that you have a mind of your own.
And above all, be pure.
By the way, do you have to smoke?
It's such an unbecoming habit,
especially for a woman to engage in.

VIRGINIA

(extinguishing her cigarette boisterously,
crosses out what she has written, flips through
a copy of Ulysses, then starts again)
I have to confess that I am puzzled,
bored, irritated...

ANGEL

No, no, no, my dear.

One does not "have to confess" anything.

Oh dear, no, that will never do.

Here, let me show you, my dear...

(The angel advances to pick up Virginia's pen. Virginia withdraws violently, clutching her pen. The angel sighs with exaggerated patience, joining her hands as if to pray, but takes to twiddling her thumbs)

VIRGINIA

(beginning to fight back)

"Mr Joyce's treatment of human sexuality..."

(Angel startled out of her statuesque repose, ruffling her wings)

ANGEL

Oh dear no, it's out of the question
that a woman even think of such things,
far less have any comments.

Remember what our dear poet

Coventry Patmore writes for our guidance:

"For she's so simply, subtly sweet,

(Virginia winces at these words)

My deepest rapture does her wrong.

Yet is it now my chosen task
To sing her worth as Maid and Wife..."

VIRGINIA

With a capital M and a capital W, no doubt.

ANGEL

Why, yes! You do know the poem!

VIRGINIA

(wearily)

"The Cathedral Close"

"Mary and Mildred"

"The Course of True Love"

"The Angel in the House"

ANGEL

The woman writer (If women must write,
and I'm personally not convinced that she
does...men have spoken so well for her
all down the ages)
to repeat myself, the woman writer
must adorn, beautify
the world of letters
as she adorns her house...

ILLEGIBLE DOCUMENT

**THE FOLLOWING
DOCUMENT(S) IS OF
POOR LEGIBILITY IN
THE ORIGINAL**

**THIS IS THE BEST
COPY AVAILABLE**

VIRGINIA

(angry now)

Wait a minute!

Why can a man write this,

and for a woman too,

and other men call it a masterpiece,

and still the world gets no comment

from women?

(she picks up Ulysses, starts reading a passage
out loud, rattling off in an Irish patter)

"Boylan gave my hand a great squeeze going
along by the Tolka in my hand there steals
another I just pressed the back of his like
that with my thumb to squeeze back
singing the young May moon shes beaming love
because he has an idea about him and me
he's not such a fool he said

I'm dining out and going to the Gaity
though I'm not going to give him the
satisfaction in any case God knows he's
changed in a way not to be always and ever
wearing the same old hat unless I paid
some nicelooking boy to do it
since I can't do it myself

a young

a young boy would like me I'd
 confuse him a little alone with him if
 we were I'd let him see my garters
 the new ones..."

(during this recitation, the angel gets
 increasingly agitated and flutters her wings)

ANGEL

Shshshshsh!
 Men are like that, full of passion.
 We must let them have their foibles,
 their obsessions.
 I agree, it may go too far,
 but it may be a great classic,
 and who are WE to say?

VIRGINIA

WE are people, like they.
 We have something to say.
 We must explore all of it,
 see things without lace round the edges,
 the ugliness, the sordidness,
 the mere unutterable dailiness
 of our lives...
all of it--the oozing mud at the bottom

ANGEL

But men can do that for us, my dear.
 The hunters, the explorers,
 the imperialists, the warriors,
 the pioneers, the priests,
they protect us, set themselves
 between us and the -er- unpleasant
 side of things.
 But we, light creatures, aspire to the
 heavens, like flowers in the forest...

VIRGINIA

(determined now, lights up another cigarette,
 goes back to her review)
My position on Mr. Joyce's Ulysses.
 "I suspect the life of the imagination
 is the same for both men and women...
 its mysterious nosings about,
 feelings around, darts and dashes
 and sudden discoveries.
 Like him, my brother, I can sit
 on the verge of a deep lake
 with a rod held out over the water
 and let my imagination

sweep unchecked round every rock
 and cranny that lies submerged
 in the depths of our unconscious being,
 seeking the pools, the depths,
 the dark places where the largest fish slumber,
 where, for example, my love waits for me
 to descend the stairs of the ocean
 floor down to his smooth downed belly
 down to his large dark root..."

ANGEL

(fist down hard on the desk, then recovering
 quickly, to speak sweetly, but with some
 effort)

Women don't think such things,
 women don't feel such things,
 Men would be shocked,
 for women wait to be sought out...

VIRGINIA

(shouting)
 But I can't write what I OUGHT to feel!
 I must write from my centre,

From whatever's in the net
when it comes back up.
Oh, I have lost the catch,
it has slipped back into the deepest
part of the ocean.
(turning to the angel)
and YOU sent it back!
(she flings the inkpot at the angel,
making a spectacular mess)
The trance is over,
I am back in the fixed world
of the abstract and the general,
the male world of "meaning"
and "categorical truth"
and "undeniable fact"
when I had thought to join
the breathless with breath.

ANGEL

(in retreat, muttering mechanically)
And above all, be pure...
And above all, be pure...
And above all, be pure...

VIRGINIA

(alone again, paces about the room with her cigarette. Docks it. Paces some more. Gets her coat, hat and stick as if to go walking, hesitates, goes back to her desk and looks over her notes. Writes rapidly, reading aloud as she does so)

"Ulysses,--an illiterate, underbred book
it seems to me;
the book of a self-taught working man
and we all know how distressing they are,
how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking
and ultimately nauseating.
When one can have the cooked flesh,
why have the raw?
If you are anaemic,
there's glory in blood.
I am not anaemic.
I may revise this later,
but I do not compromise my critical sagacity.
(she twirls her walking stick, then brings
it down with a crack. Smiling playfully)
I plant my stick in the ground
to mark page 200.
That is all. (exits)

Act I: sc. iii.

SETTING: the original room, only now it is a dining hall at a women's college, and is denuded of anything elegant. Fold-away tables are stacked against one wall, and chairs have been arranged in rows for a lecture. There is a podium upstage right. General effect is modern, plain, practical. Virginia Woolf is at the podium, and there are assorted women sitting in a "still". The scene is dim at first, and there are soft lights flashing like those off water or leaves. At first there is no movement, just voices...(women's voices).

VOICE 1

Virginia, Virginia...the room!
You have forgotten the room!

VOICE 2

The familiar but forgotten room
of your dreams...

VOICE 3

Where you enter and know
you are at home, because its
down by the ocean,
at the cutting edge of the world...

VOICE 1

and you ARE the window
and you ARE the sea

and you ARE the fins, fans, wings,
weeds, whorls, shells...

VOICE 2

and you ARE the silver darts
and you ARE the rod and reel
and the line
going down in the waves...

VOICE 3

Swim, Virginia, swim hard!

VOICE 1

Let down, Virginia, softly
let down, and only then
only then, dreaming,
will you haul in the catch.

VOICE 3

We are alone

ALL

We are together

VOICE 2

Our feet kick our own flanks only...

ALL

But our hands join in the dance.
Tell us about the room, Virginia.
Tell us about the room.

(The lights come up brighter, more constant, and the water flashes fade out. The figures on the stage become more animated, normal. The women are taking notes, smoking, whispering together, etc., and Virginia Woolf is at the podium, concluding her lecture)

VIRGINIA

And so, you see, I came to the conclusion--
no, perhaps not conclusion, but
opinion, at any rate,
that a woman, if she wants to write,
must have £ 500. a year
and a room of her own...

MAGGIE

Does it have a sofa?

SUSAN

Does it have a bookcase
crammed with classic?

RACHEL

Does it have Pissarro's and
Van Goghs on the walls?

CAROLINE

Does it have potted azalias
and a cocktail cabinet?

ALL

As our brothers' rooms at Trinity?

VIRGINIA

It must have a window you can open
and a door you can close,
and most importantly,
an inhabitant--
you.

MAGGIE

But what about meals?

SUSAN

What about dealines?

CAROLINE

What about all my appointments
and social engagements?

RACHEL

What about one's husband,
one's children?

VIRGINIA

Do you think Shakespeare
worried about those things
when he was writing Othello?

CAROLINE

Well, he was a man!
Women don't have that kind of genius.
No woman, past, present, or future
would ever be able to write the plays

of Shakespeare.

Even a bishop said so!

VIRGINIA

Yes, the same bishop who said
that cats do not, as a matter of fact,
go to heaven, though they have,
he added, souls of sorts.
How much thinking these old gentlemen
save us!

How the borders of ignorance
shrink back at their approach.

SUSAN

But, Mrs. Woolf, why are there
so few great women writers?

VIRGINIA

Look about you. What do you see?

RACHEL

Walls.

VIRGINIA

No rich dark panelling,
oiled for centuries?

RACHEL

Plaster and paint. Needs redoing.

VIRGINIA

No priceless oil-paintings
of famous women to inspire you?

RACHEL

There's the week's menu, typed,
by the door.
And a copy of a watercolour of flowers.
Oh, and the hours to be in by,
and regulations concerning dress,
and smoking, and so on.

VIRGINIA

Are there heavy oak tables that stay put
after the partridges and sauce,
silverware and candles
have been removed?

CAROLINE

(disgusted)
Fold-away tables after
the beef and cabbage,
the prunes and custard.

VIRGINIA

And wine?

CAROLINE

Water!

RACHEL

But my brother Philip
has those things at Brasenose...

SUSAN

My brother Adrian
has those things at Kings...

MAGGIE

And my brother Nigel has all that
at Magdalen...

CAROLINE

My grandfather and father
and uncle and brothers
had all that at Christchurch...

VIRGINIA

Don't you see?
Its the incredible poverty
of women that has made the difference.
The silver and gold,
the heavy stones,
the stained glass,
the bonds, the checks,
the acts of parliament,
the visits of kings
went into the education

and praise and liberty of mankind...

but womankind?

SUSAN

Alright, but we have come a long way.

We have bedsitters in a women's college
at Cambridge!

And what if it is brick and concrete,
with weeds amongst the untended grass,
it's a room, a room of our own
where we can study the great writers
and learn from them how to write.
We can read Chaucer and Spenser
and Milton and Pope and Dr. Johnson
and Keats and Galsworthy and Kipling
and then we can write...

VIRGINIA

Ah, wait a moment.

Listen to this sentence:

"The grandeur of their works
was an argument with them,
not to stop short, but to proceed.
They could have no higher excitement or
satisfaction than in the exercise of their
art and endless generation of truth and
beauty. Success prompts to exertion;

and habit facilitates success."

That is a man's sentence;

a swashbuckling and a martial stride.

Our stride is different.

Our experience is different.

We must not be afraid to write

as a woman writes.

MAGGIE

Of bathing the children?

RACHEL

Of peeling the potatoes?

CAROLINE

Of arranging the flowers on the dresser?

SUSAN

Of emptying sand out of shoes?

RACHEL

Of sewing on buttons

and shortening hems?

CAROLINE

Of mint and parsley?

MAGGIE

Of salt and pepper?

VIRGINIA

Are these not as much a part

of here and now, on earth,

as distant wars and great debates?

RACHEL

My brother, Philip, at Brasenose,
puts on high boots, on the farm,
and sees to the pigs.

SUSAN

Adrian--he's the one at King's--
likes to bottle fruit.

MAGGIE

And Nigel has made a tapestry
with all kinds of shells and flowers
and strange beasts...

CAROLINE

And Sebastian photographs the children.

VIRGINIA

These are as much man's
as the grail or the stars are woman's.

(All the women come into a space, centre stage, barefoot. A
tambourine is struck, and they dance, holding hands, and chant)

ALL

To celebrate our humanness,
To celebrate our difference,
To be both man and woman,
To be neither man nor woman,
To celebrate our belonging

We meet and part
and dance and speak
and learn the new art
of untroubled silence.

Let the water speak.

(they dance to the tambourine in silence for a few moments, as
the lights dim to the subtle flashing water lights, then dimout)

Act I: Sc. iv.

SETTING: Same room as in Sc.i., overlooking Bloomsbury Square.

Late at night, dark but for street lamp outside the window. An addition to the room are the post-Impressionist paintings on the walls. The room is dim but for fluid, watery light flashing over it. Several people are seated there--comfortably disposed on sofa, armchairs and floor. Virginia is standing, leaning on the mantelpiece, centre. They are all immobile, with eyes closed to begin with.

THOBY

Virginia! Virginia!

VITA

Jinny! Jinny!

LYTTON

Virginia?

LEONARD

Virginia! You won those struggles,

Remember?

How those young friends of mine
at Cambridge loved you!

ROGER

The search for beauty,
remember?

LYTTON

The search for truth,

THOBY

The search for love,
remember?

VITA

The talk, the fun, the ease!

THOBY

(laughing)
The fright we gave people.

ROGER

The shocks to the world.

LYTTON

In our late-night conversations...

LEONARD

In our living together...

VITA

(imitating Queen Victoria)
We are not amused, Virginia!

CHORUS OF FRIENDS

Virginia! Wake up!
Remember Bloomsbury!

ROGER

Bloomsbury.

LYTTON

Bloomsbury Square.

LEONARD

Thursday evenings...

(here the lights are coming up in the room, bright, constant; the flashing "water" lights fading, the people becoming animated)

VITA

The Bloomsberries met!

VIRGINIA

(leaning on mantelpiece, smoking a cigarette
in a long holder)

No, it's not representational art,
of course, because of the lines--
the extreme simplicity of the lines,
the forms.

All that John Bull sees are
the huge breasts...

VITA

and the huge buttocks
ten times the size of her head...

VIRGINIA

Which is what they have always seen...

VITA

only in secret...

VIRGINIA

If it's behind heavy velvet curtains...

VITA

Hush hush...

VIRGINIA

Or between expensive leather bindings

VITA

Unexpurgated...

VIRGINIA

Padded with thick brocade and tweed...

VITA

All hush hush...

VIRGINIA

Then its alright, because
everybody is busy denying
what we all know exists,
the beauty, to the lover,
of the female pelt.

LYTTON

(pretending to be shocked)

Ladies! Ladies!

Are we discussing aesthetics
or lust?

VIRGINIA

(mischievously)

Glad to see you make a distinction,
Lytt, old friend.

Anyone for coacoa?

THOBY

Yes, I'll have some.

ROGER

Scotch for me, Jinny.

LEONARD

Yes, I'll take some, darling.

And the buns, remember.

In the pantry, second shelf.

ROGER

That's it, Vita.

You and Jinny hit on something.

The external extravagances of Victorianism
banished vitality
by seperating truth and beauty
and losing both!

(he kicks the ornate Victorian chair next to him)

Look at it! As decadent as can be
with its gargoyles and curleques
and unnecessary extravagances,
neither useful nor decorative
in my opinion,
and hellishly uncomfortable
into the bargain.

(lights up pipe, looks at Vita, cups her face in his hand)

Now here is beauty in the raw,
classic lines, internal force...

VITA

My modelling fee puts it beyond
attainment...

LYTTON

(returning with the buns, handing them round)

But tell me, then,
if lines, if the forms
are the ultimate in art,
then we must move with all haste
into an age of pure design
unrelated to anything human,
must we not?
And is pure geometry the highest art, then?
It seems logical that it would be,
and yet...

THOBY

And yet. Yes, I share your doubts,
Lytton. It seems that these forms
are inherent in human beings, too...
in the things of our daily lives,
in the shape of Jinny's face,

in this cup and saucer and spoon.

This is what saves us from such
abstraction.

This bun, now--our daily bread.

Its form is worth a hundred

Raphaelite angels...

(all laugh)

LYTTON

How incorrigibly secular you are,

Thoby! Just like your unregenerate
sisters here.

VIRGINIA

(taking a glass of wine from the table, twisting it
in the lamplight)

To paint, to draw, to describe

this form

is to feel the glass where it curves,

is to hear the squeak of the finger

on its wet stem,

is to see the deep fireflashes in the liquid,

is to hear the ring of all glasses

and the splash of all waterfalls,

is to smell the fermentation

of fields and leaves and berries,

and at last,

to drink deep into the warmth
and talk and love of friends,
to toast Leo, Roger, Lytton,
Vita, Thoby...

It is a human occupation,
or we are dead.

ROGER

Oh, jolly well put, Jinny,
jolly well put!
I hope you're putting that
in your next book.

LYTTON

Still, I'm not convinced
that reason and abstraction
aren't the highest that
civilization can reach.
We can't allow ourselves
to get carried away by intuition...

VIRGINIA

The fascists are certainly
in no danger of that!
We are about to be rolled
flatter than the lawns at Hampton Court
by the demise of intuition.

Passion and intuition,
like truth and beauty,
have fled underground and lost each other...

ROGER

And art must bring them back,
must bring about their consummation.

VIRGINIA

Swishing our skirts through the barley,
binding cornflowers and poppies
to present...oh, to whom?
And they will say,
because I am thin and gaunt
and fuss about words
and have no children
that I am an old stick,
sexless.

THOBY

They will only have to read
what you write
to know that is not true, Jinny.
You have fished the waters
and brought something bright
back from the silt of time.

LEONARD

We do not want to be rolled flat

by colonialism, by fascism, by socialism
or by any other -ism.

We meet because we want to know.

(they have come into a circle, kneeling or sitting, holding hands,
and the dialogue becomes more like a chant)

LYTTON

It is late, it is late,
and we are a mixed company.

THOBY

I am neither man nor woman.

ROGER

I am both man and woman.

VITA

We meet to create our lives.

VIRGINIA

We meet because of death
And because we are alone...

LEONARD

Remembering our loves.

(the room lights are dimming, and the "water" lights resume their
soft flashing over the scene)

VIRGINIA

Are you there, Thoby?

THOBY

Yes, I'm here. Always.

Lytton?

LYTTON

Yes, Thoby, I am here.

Vita, where are you?

VITA

Here, at your left hand.

And at my right?

ROGER

It's me, Roger. Leo?

LEONARD

Yes, I'm here. And Jinny?

VIRGINIA

I am here, and I am not here.

We meet because we create each other
and because we are alone...

LEONARD

Remembering our loves...

DIMOUT

Act II: Sc. i.

SETTING: Monk's House, Sussex. It is a small cottage in the country, with a nice garden, lawn, trees, a pond. The scene is at the back of the house, with french windows opening onto the lawn, through which a dining room can be clearly seen. The Downs can be seen in the distance. Virginia is sitting in a chair on the lawn, writing. A clock can be heard ticking, and an occasional rumble of guns. As before, the scene is at first dimly lit with flashing "water" lights while voices are heard, and then gradual animation into reality.

LEONARD'S VOICE

It's quiet here at Monk's House,
Jinny darling.
You'll be able to rest here,
recover.
Or work, if you want to.
Away from all that bustle in London.

VITA'S VOICE

It's beautiful country around here,
Jinny. Let's go for a spin
on our bicycles!
And you wear your pink hat with ribbons,
and I'll wear my green.

VOICE OF A YOUNG GIRL

Aunt Jinny, I've caught a bird!

It's wing is broken.

Aunt Jinny, make it fly!

Make it fly!

VOICE OF A YOUNG BOY

Aunt Jinny, will you help me
practice my batting?

VOICE OF OLD VIRGINIA

Virginia! Remember the ball,
remember the ball.

Straight and hard, Virginia.

(Distant rumble of guns. The flashing lights fade, and bright
daylight comes up on the garden scene. Clock ticking audibly)

VIRGINIA

I must write something before I die,
something!

But what?

If I offer myself--and that is all I know--
then what can I deliver to you?

What I see, what I hear,
what I smell, what I taste,

what I touch, what I feel!

Shall I tell you about the sausage
and kippers?

There now, even to write those words
seems to make both sausage AND kippers
more real.

Life?

Life!

The drops of time...time that rises
and gathers and falls...drop...drop...

(clock ticking audibly at this point)

But the moments that I meet

I must return to you,
for it is in the meeting
of water and land

that our pulse beats.

Waves, then.

You will wash over me,
and I will hold still.

(At this point, very delicate music is heard, and the moths enter,
silver and white, extremely fragile and beautiful. This signifies
moments of inspiration in Virginia's "composing" sequences through-
out this scene.)

VIRGINIA

There now! The moths.

The soul's passage. Ephemeral.

(She gets up and starts pacing the lawn, pen in hand, excited. The moths are fluttering close by her. Enter Leonard with a copy of The Times. The moths vanish. The music fades. The clock is ticking again.)

LEONARD

Here's the review of your book in the Times, dear.

Remember, it's good old Richmond writing.

VIRGINIA

Oh, what's he got to say this time?

Let's see. "Mrs. Woolf has offered us once more a delightful skim over the water, but the depths have been missed.

No real resistance, no deep currents.

No real characters, not much plot, sadly lacking in description, nothing really solid to catch hold of, as you can in Dickens or Trollope or Thacheray or Scott or Galsworthy or Kipling or Bennett or J. B. Priestley."

LEONARD

(laughing)

Ah, you've hit it!

You should write your own reviews, darling. You could be so much more

devastating than they are!

By the way, The Times wants the article
on Joyce soon.

Can you get it to them next week,
Rodney asked.

And the manuscripts are piling up at the Press.
I think we'll have to go up there
this weekend, dear.
They need our help.

VIRGINIA

Oh, very well.

By the way, do moths fly by day?

LEONARD

No.

VIRGINIA

(trancelike)

Strange.

LEONARD

Um?

VIRGINIA

Oh, nothing, dear.

I say, Leo, would you bring me some tea?
And we'll look at the calendar
and the train timetable.

(Leonard goes in through the french window. Virginia resumes her pacing of the lawn. The clock ticking fades. The music returns. The moths return. She stops still, listening intently. She looks into the dining room. It is lighting up there, a soft green light. The table is set for a meal. There is a rose bud in a slender vase that will be in full bloom by the end of the scene)

VIRGINIA

The light touches something in the room,
makes it a green cave like a stoneless
fruit.

It could all take place in the room,
with the table and its white cloth,
with the napkins and glasses and spoons,
with the flower that unfolds.

It will unfold,
its petals reaching around him,
and time will gather and rise
and drop such beauty in moments only,
this I see for a second,
and shall try to fix in words,
to forge a ring of steel
around what vanishes.

"I remember his beauty" said Rhoda.

"Look where he comes" said Neville.

"The moths dance, the flower quivers"
 said Bernard, "but the chained beast
 stamps on the shore."

(There is a distant rumble of guns. Virginia resumes her chair,
 pen in hand.)

Fill the fountain pen
 and forge a ring of steel...

(Music fades, moths depart; clock heard again, and enter, through
 the bushes, Saxon the gardener, with muddy boots, sleeves rolled
 up, secateurs in hand)

SAXON

I've trimmed up the laurels
 in the front, ma'am.
 Real nice, they look, real nice.

VIRGINIA

Good, Saxon.

SAXON

There's a window needs fixing
 in the greenhouse, ma'am.
 There's a spare pane of glass,
 but I'll have to go into the village
 to get some putty.

VIRGINIA

Yes, oh, and Saxon,
 would you get me some stamps at the post
 office. and I need four more jars

it's a good crop this summer.

SAXON

Yes, ma'am.

Oh, and there's that down-pipe
by the kitchen, ma'am.

I'll do that when I get back.

Let's see, then...

the putty and the stamps
and the bottles for the gooseberries.

VIRGINIA

There's ten shillings on the sideboard,
underneath the blue bowl.

(conspiratorially)

That's all Leo's allowing me
for incidental expenses this week.
And I don't know how my next book shall sell.
So no prodigality, Saxon.

SAXON

Right you are, ma'am.

I'll go on my bike
and be back in a jiffy.

VIRGINIA

(slightly irritated)

Greenhouse window, putty,
stamps, jars, gooseberries,
drainpipe--

yes, it's all very well,
but what about my book?
The moths, the flowers,
the circle of friends,
the concentric petals,
the ring of steel,
the opening petals,
the closing fingers,
the long stretch to the finish line,
oh, I lose the beat,
I lose the beat,
because there is no retreat!

(Music heard again, the moths approach briefly, then music fades.
She sighs)

I lose the beat.

(clock ticking audibly again, and a distant thud of bombs.
The moths depart. She presses her hands to her temples)

London will be destroyed,
and the Press, and a lifetime of work,
and my friends.

I must write something before I die!

(Her 8-year-old niece, Angelica, comes bursting into the garden
with an injured bird)

ANGELICA

(breathless, nearly incoherent)

Aunt Virginia! Look what I've found!

Mummy told me to come over to you.

She said you could help it...

It's a thrush, isn't it?

I think it got hit by Quentin's ball.

VIRGINIA

(brightening, smiling. She is always
delighted by her niece)

Oh dear yes, I'm afraid

it's got an injured wing.

(she takes the bird gently in her hands)

Well, we'll have to see what we can do.

Put it in a splint and treat it

with all the respect

of a veteran of foreign wars.

(distant rumble of guns again)

ANGELICA

Isn't it beautiful, Aunt Jinny!

Look at the speckles.

VIRGINIA

Camouflage, my dear.

A trooper like this

has to be on the front lines,

in the trenches
if it's anywhere near Quentin!
Not to mention the neighbouring cats.

ANGELICA

Oh, Aunt Virginia, can you make
it fly again?

VIRGINIA

(laughing)
My dear, I can do many things,
but I cannot arrange combat release
for this little fellow.

(at this point, the bird flutters its last, and dies)

ANGELICA

Oh, it's not moving anymore!
It's lying perfectly still!

VIRGINIA

It is dead, my dear.

ANGELICA

Is that all? Is that all?
It flies and it finds worms
and builds nests and flies again
and then it's dead?
Is that all?

VIRGINIA

That is all, my dear.
But you see, from the laurels

to the rosebushes and thence
to the elderberries
are years and years of joy
for this tiny heart--
tremendous energy, my dear,
tremendous energy,
like linking star to star.
And finding its mate, oh,
that takes centuries of waiting,
knowing she comes
and remembering her beauty
before she opens the door
so he can say
"Look where she comes!"
And then they must build,
like Monk's House there, you see?
A site to be found,
stone to be quarried,
beams to be heaved,
windows fitted, tiles dovetailed,
brick chimney properly squared,
and you need cement and putty
and spatulas and hammers and nails
and wheelbarrows...

(the light is coming up in the dining room again, the rose on
the table visibly more open)

And then the tables and chairs,
the blue bowls, the silver knives,
the white tablecloth,
the single rose,
the talk, and the laughter
and the silence...
oh, yes, that is all!

ANGELICA

And the birds know it too?

VIRGINIA

(hugging her)

Yes, my dear.

The birds know it too.

Their passage seems shorter,
that's all.

But what of ours, to the stars'?

And yet, we know.

ANGELICA

I love you, Aunt Jinny!

(she takes the dead bird carefully, goes to the bushes to bury it)

Will this be a good place
for a grave, Aunt Jinny?

VIRGINIA

Yes, my dear.

ANGELICA

(busy digging)

You tell the best stories, Aunt Virginia!

VIRGINIA

(mischievously)

It's because they are true!

Putty and wheelbarrows and bottled fruit
and all.

(lights fade to a spot on the rose, completely open now, then
dimout)

Act II: Sc. ii.

SETTING: Monk's House again. Vita, Leonard, Roger and Lytton are in the garden. Virginia is sick, in the bedroom above the dining room. The blinds are drawn down. The scene is at first dim, with soft watery lights flashing over it. As in previous scenes, voices will be heard, and then moving into reality.

(clock ticking audibly)

VOICE OF VIRGINIA

(weak, distraught)

Your limbs are rotting,
like old carrots.

They are heavy and dark
between your clean white sheets.

If you raise them
they will fall in wet black clumps
and smell disgusting
and stain your bed.

Your body is rotting vegetable.

(she screams, then subsides into moans)

The trees outside have no desire
to be metaphores.

They are just trees, indifferent trees.

I am tired of the feverish leaves
on my blinds.

Leave me alone.

Let me lie still.

No movement.

The Emperor of Abbysinia?

Yes, of course I am.

Oh, close down, close in,

go down, down...

VOICE OF ANGELICA

The bird, Aunt Jinny!

VOICE OF OLD VIRGINIA

The ball, Virginia!

VOICE OF LEONARD

The Press, darling.

And the Times!

VOICE OF VIRGINIA

The book, Virginia.

Oh, even the moths are tiresome!

Now its the waves, beating, beating
on the shore

(rumble of guns)

and the chained beast stamping.

What's it all for?

All that effort, to grasp-- oh, what?

To leap across the abyss again.

I'm tired.

VOICE OF CRITIC 1

Mrs. Woolf's work is insubstantial...

VOICE OF CRITIC 2

unreal...

VOICE OF CRITIC 3

transparent...

VOICE OF CRITIC 1

too militantly feminist...

VOICE OF CRITIC 2

indeed, Sapphist...

VOICE OF CRITIC 3

highbrow...

VOICE OF CRITIC 1

priggish...

VOICE OF CRITIC 2

cheap, easy...

VOICE OF CRITIC 3

Insubstantial...

(lights coming up on the garden scene, watery lights fading out
as Virginia's voice fades away)

VOICE OF VIRGINIA

I am tired, I am tired.

I close in upon myself.

I let go, and go down...

like a stone in water...

VITA

(casting a rock in the garden pool)

How long has she been like this,
Leo?

LEONARD

Three weeks now.

VITA

It's always the summer, isn't it?
Ever since that summer mother died.
That was her first big breakdown.

LEONARD

Yes.

LYTTON

But it's physical, too, isn't it?

ROGER

The mind and body are in delicate balance.
Who can say what tips the other off?

LEONARD

Yes, her severe headaches,
the pains in her body.
That starts it,
but then the voices take over.

LYTTON

Voices?

LEONARD

She says she hears voices
 compelling her, mocking her,
 drawing her this way and that
 through the bushes, down to the shore.
 And voices in the waves.

ROGER

(gets down to the edge of the pond, gazes
 into it)

Jinny's always had a fascination
 with water, hasn't she?
 It runs through all her work,
 have you noticed?

(he picks up a book off a lawnchair, flips to a page)

Here:

"For ever," said Louis, "divided.
 We have sacrificed the embrace among
 the ferns, and love by the lake,
 standing like conspirators who have
 drawn apart to share some secret,
 by the urn. But now look,
 as we stand here, a ripple breaks
 on the horizon.
 The net is raised higher and higher.
 It comes to the top of the water.

The water is broken by silver,
 by quivering little fish.
 Now leaping, now lashing,
 they are laid on the shore.
 Life tumbles its catch upon the grass.
 There are figures coming towards us.
 Are they men or are they women?
 They still wear the ambiguous draperies
 of the flowing tide
 in which they have been immersed."

VITA

Oh, what a masterpiece
 that book is!
 Good old Jinny.

LYTTON

But what can we do to help her?

LEONARD

Be there, when she comes back.

ROGER

If the war does not get us first.
 It's getting bad in London.

LEONARD

Yes, and we're not all that safe
 out here, directly in the path
 of the German bombers coming across
 the Channel.

VITA

I'm frightened, Roger.

If London goes, it will be the end
for Virginia.

She loves that city!

ROGER

But she's a tough old bird.

Look, I remember...

(picks up book again, finds the place)

She's talking about the crowds that
go down into the Underground,
all black and dusty and smelly,
a veritable Inferno,
and the dirty streets where they
re-emerge,
and yet, look at what she says:
"But now I swear, making deliberately
in front of the glass
those slight preparations that equip me;
I will not be afraid.
Think of the superb buses, red and yellow,
stopping and starting, punctually in order,
Think of the powerful and beautiful cars

that now slow to a foot's pace
and now shoot forward;
think of men, think of women,
equipped, prepared, driving onward.
This is the triumphant procession;
this is the army of victory
with banners and brass eagles
and heads crowned with laurel leaves
won in battle.
They are better than savages in loincloths,
and women whose hair is dank
whose long breasts sag,
with children tugging at their long breasts.
These broad thoroughfares--
Picadilly South, Picadilly North,
Regent Street and the Haymarket--
are sanded paths of victory
driven through the jungle.
I too, with my patent-leather shoes,
my handkerchief that is but a film of gauze,
my reddened lips
and my finely pencilled eyebrows
march to victory with the band."

(they are silent, looking up at the window where Virginia is lying, then in a reverie around the pond. They do not at first see Virginia as she slowly emerges through the french window, pale, weak, but smiling, in a yellow robe and slippers)

VITA

There's a goldfish!

ROGER

Where?

VITA

There! Just gone under the waterlilies.

LYTTON

There's Virginia!

LEONARD

Virginia!

VIRGINIA

They're not goldfish,

they're...

ROGER

(groans playfully)

Prepare yourselves for a lecture
in ichthyology!

Dimout

VOICE OF WATER:

a verse play

by

SHELAGH STROMBERG,

B. A., Kansas State University, 1978

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ABSTRACT

Voice of Water is a verse play based on the life and work of the twentieth-century British novelist, Virginia Woolf. It attempts to distill the major conflicts of her personality and her struggles as an artist, and to show how the material of an individual's life can be transformed into their art. The play faces some of the same issues of her time--war, morality, the women's issue, and the freedom of the artist. It is only loosely based on historical "fact"--fidelity to the inner truth of Virginia Woolf's drama being the major controlling concern.

The play is divided into two acts, the first act dealing predominantly with Virginia Woolf's professional and social life, and containing scenes which take place in London. The second act is designed to move into her personal and artistic struggles, and the scenes take place at "Monk's House," her retreat in the Sussex country. The basic structure is, thus, of an antithetical nature, reflecting the many antitheses of her life--creativity versus sharp critical faculty, fixity versus fluidity, light versus dark, warmth versus withdrawal, courage versus despair.

The play is written in verse in an attempt to recreate Virginia Woolf's own highly poetic diction and imagery. It has been said that she had "a voice of water," that is, a language that is both resonant and fluid. A "voice of water" is a voice to be heard, as well as read, and it is with this in mind that I hope to bring Virginia Woolf's voice back to the public.