

## **KILLING ME SOFTLY WITH HER FANGS: THE ROLE OF FEMALE VICTIMAGE AND CANNIBALISM IN *THE VOYAGE OUT***

*Isabel M<sup>a</sup> Andrés Cuevas  
Universidad de Granada*

### *Abstract*

A woman of a special sensitivity, Virginia Woolf was particularly concerned with the unequal opportunities for women in post-Victorian society. Profoundly aware of the heavy burden women had to bear under patriarchal law, Woolf was no less combative with men as with those females who even contributed to perpetuate the status quo by confining themselves and other women within the narrow premises of patriarchal dictates. In this essay, I will discuss how the presence of images connected with acts of female devouring and cannibalization in Woolf's *The Voyage Out* respond to the narrator's intention of presenting a bizarre panorama of anachronism and incongruous norms in which the inadequacy of a patriarchal system stands out more than ever. Under the optics of these grotesque images, a claim for subversion and active involvement of the whole society of

### *Resumen*

Dotada de una especial sensibilidad, Virginia Woolf era especialmente consciente de la desigualdad de oportunidades para las mujeres en la sociedad post-victoriana. Profundamente conocedora de la pesada carga que las mujeres tenían que soportar bajo la ley patriarcal, Woolf no sería tan combativa con los hombres como con aquellas mujeres que contribuían incluso a la perpetuación de esta situación confinándose a sí mismas y a otras mujeres a los restrictivos dominios de los dictados patriarcales. En este artículo se analiza cómo la presencia de imágenes conectadas con actos de canibalismo y consumición por parte de mujeres en la novela de Woolf *The Voyage Out* responden a la intención de la narradora de presentar un panorama absurdo, presidido por el anacronismo y las normas ilógicas, donde la incongruencia de un sistema centrado en el patriarcado es aún más evidente. Bajo la óptica de estas imágenes grotescas, se apela en especial a la subversión y la participación

her time is voiced. At the same time, an already grossly distorted socio-cultural reality comes to the fore.

*Keywords:* Woolf, grotesque, *The Voyage Out*, patriarchy, subversion, cannibalism, feminism.

activa de la sociedad, al mismo tiempo que sale a la luz una ya distorsionada e ilógica realidad socio-cultural.

*Palabras clave:* Woolf, grotesco, *The Voyage Out*, patriarcado, subversión, canibalismo, feminismo.

Profoundly aware of a reality of patriarchal oppression and of the existence of a fatherly law that kept women submitted to male dictates, Virginia Woolf enacts, as early as in 1912 –the year in which *The Voyage Out*, her first novel, was written– a carnivalesque microcosm which reflects her acute perception of the truth of a patently distorted reality. Woolf creates in her novel a surreptitiously whimsical universe which provides her with the suitable scenario where to expose the meaninglessness of an anachronous system, where cannibalizations, or incongruous hybridities and inversions combine with a catalogue of gross, preposterous males who attest for a society in need of a thorough renovation. This occurs in consonance with the presentation of a system in which males, despite their position of privilege within the patriarchal order, appear as feeble and ineffective fools. As a counterpart, women arise as the potential sites of vitality and renewal indefatigably striving to validate themselves in spite of the oppression to which they are enforced: “for the time, her own body was the source of all the life in the world, which tried to burst forth here –there– and was repressed now by Mr. Bax, now by Evelyn, now by the imposition of ponderous stupidity, the weight of the entire world” (Woolf 1992:300). In keeping with the carnival paradigm mentioned above for the novel, Rachel evokes Bakhtin’s notion of the female body as connected with the reproductive material principle of the womb. As R. Ginsburg has noted, “the true meaning of the *material bodily principle* that dominates the grotesque as expressed in carnival laughter is the *maternal bodily principle*”<sup>1</sup> (Ginsburg 1993:173). Indeed, Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body as submitted to a perpetual process of becoming and regeneration would find a representative example in the Kertch terracotta figurines of senile, though pregnant, women he describes in his *Rabelais*: “among the famous Kertch terracotta figurines, [...] we find those of old pregnant hags, whose old age and pregnancy are grotesquely highlighted. Let us remember as well that those old women are

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis as in the original.

laughing too”<sup>2</sup> (Bakhtin 1984a:29). Closely dovetailed with this conception of the feminine, Bakhtin emphasized the ceaseless regenerative power of the Earth, thus retrieving an essential connection with the maternal body, deriving from an anthropological basis which looks back at ancient mythological beliefs: “in grotesque realism, [...] the earth is the principle of absorption (the grave and the womb), at the same time as it is the principle of birth and resurrection, the maternal bosom”<sup>3</sup> (Bakhtin 1984a:25).

Connected with this concept of the incorporation of one individual into another one –or even the fusion of both– images of cannibalism and engulfing abound in *The Voyage Out*. Throughout this essay, I will consider images of female cannibalism in the novel as responding to two different purposes. On the one hand, inasmuch as they represent a situation of perpetuation of patriarchal commandments, these images will reinforce the preposterousness of the whole social system. On the other hand, they sometimes reflect a powerful reaction against patriarchal structures, whereby the female, transformed into the agent of the devouring act, enacts her destruction of the male and the scaffolding of the patriarchal edifice of female coercion he represents. Virginia Woolf denounced the oppression exerted by a patriarchal system which annihilates any possibility for women’s self-realization. Inasmuch as she perceived the male as a bestialized destroyer of their potential, Woolf found in cannibalism a vivid means for illustrating the subjugated position of women in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

When dealing with cannibalism, numerous approaches can be adopted. Francis Barker has underlined the effectiveness of this metaphor in the study of different disciplines: “even the most fervent believer in cannibal rites would have to acknowledge that cannibalism is now primarily [...] a trope of exceptional power” (Barker 1998:4). In her study on cannibalism and literature, Maggie Kilgour insists on the usefulness of incorporation as a subsuming metaphor that describes the union and then the dissolution of opposites or separate identities in a text (Kilgour 1990), whereas Paul Lyons concludes that “cannibalism figures as a crucial semiotic operator, as sign of the abject quality in the other against which the nervous system revolts” (Lyons 2001:129). In turn, Carlos A. Jáuregui is more explicit in the strategic use of cannibalism as a trope:

---

<sup>2</sup> Author’s translation.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*.

As an ethnographic image, as an erotic trope, or as a frequent cultural metaphor, cannibalism represents a way of understanding the *Others*, the same as occurs with selfhood; it is a trope which entails the dissolution of identity, and conversely, a model of apprehension of difference. The *Other* named by cannibalism is located behind a permeable and specular border, full of tricks and encounters with self-images: the *cannibal* speaks about the *Other* and about ourselves, about eating and being eaten, about Empire and its fractures, about the savage and the cultural anxieties of civilization. Just like the cannibal trope has been a sign of American otherness and it has served to support the discursive edifice of Imperialism, it may also articulate –as it has indeed– discourses against the invention of America and colonialism itself.<sup>4</sup> (Jáuregui 1998:13)

In general terms, thus, the cannibal metaphor has served to portray the supremacy of one individual or group of individuals over another one. Very often, this has been used to denounce the dominance of the colonizer over the colonized, in particular, as it has aptly serve to contrast the former's "civilized state" with animalistic barbarism, or may justify his inhuman behaviour in time of war (Shipman 1987:76). In this essay, the cannibal trope will be analyzed inasmuch as it entails a dual meaning. This double reference of cannibalism overlaps with the pattern of destruction/regeneration which is central to Bakhtin's definition of carnival. According to the Russian critic, the essence of carnival mainly rests on its twofold nature, which comprises, on the one hand, the abolishment of the old order, often embodied by an expiatory victim, or Carnival Fool, which is eventually disposed of, and the subsequent replacement of this order by a renewed and improved one. The latter is only possible via the annihilation of this scapegoat –representative of all the evil, fear, and repression present in the former system. In keeping with this disposal of the appointed victim, representations of devouring and cannibalism lie at the core of carnival imagery. Furthermore, not only does this act of destruction involve an act of defiance and an overt transgression of the normative (Bakhtin 1984b:122-124). Concomitantly, through the devouring act, the monadic identity of the body is challenged, insofar as a fusion with the Other occurs, to the extent of wiping out any possibility of distinction between the consuming and the consumed body: "The images of the banquet are intimately dovetailed with those of the grotesque body. It is sometimes difficult to trace an accurate border between them, so organically and essentially linked as they are; [in these images,] a mixture of eating and eaten bodies occurs" (1984a:251). Viewed as a

---

<sup>4</sup> Author's translation. Emphasis as in the original.

compendium of collective evils, the carnival fool was thus disposed of, which allowed for the advent of a renewed life:

For grotesque realism, the lower is the life-giving earth and the fleshly bosom; the lower is always a beginning [...]. The carnival hell is the earth that devours and gives birth [...]. Therefore, the terrible and unearthly are transformed into earth, that is, into a nurturing mother that devours so as to give birth to something newer and better.<sup>5</sup> (1984a:86-87)

In keeping with the destructive effect of Victorian society upon the female, the narrator in *The Voyage Out* deploys a social edifice still deeply imbued with the dictations of the patriarchal rule. Moreover, these fatherly precepts have been paradoxically assumed by women, whose conformist attitude and active participation in male aspirations result in their inevitable destruction. As Woolf suggests, this conspiracy to mask a society idealistically rendered, in which the real sexual identity is often camouflaged, turns society into a grotesquely bestialized jungle-like existence. Accordingly, a form of grotesque cannibalism towards woman is targeted by women themselves, implicitly slaughtered and dismembered by the phagocytic action of the passive attitude of those ferrous defenders of tradition. Often belonging to the older generations, these detractors of change allow for the perpetuation of patriarchal dominance.

The destructive action of these forces operating in Victorian society is particularly evident in the case of Rachel Vinrace, the female protagonist in Woolf's novel. As will be discussed, in the course of her boat trip, she becomes the victim of different episodes of abuse, which turns her into an epitome of the condition of women in this period. As illustrative of the birth mark imprinted upon women by a patriarchal dictatorship, Rachel's own name happens to be the Hebraic term for *lamb* (Moore 1984:103 n.3), the prototypical scapegoat figure. This reference chimes in with the absurdly bucolic portrayal of Susan and Arthur, the couple about to get married in *The Voyage Out*, as "lamb and ewe" (Woolf 1992:156). In the narration of her purely traditional life, symbolically enclosed within the precincts marked by Victorian furniture (Woolf 1992:242), Rachel gives Terence an account of the restrictive habits allowed for her, which include the systematic carving of the lamb's neck at the hands of Aunt Clara (Woolf 1992:243). Representative of old exponents of Victorian values, Aunt Clara turns into the perpetrator of a system which –like Miss Allan's talismanic preservation of the *ménthe* bottle through generations– is zealously kept decade after decade. This becomes clearer when she turns into

---

<sup>5</sup> Author's translation.

a “victim dropped from the claws of a bird of prey” (Woolf 1992:35), as envisioned by Helen:

“Go on, please go on,” [Terence] urged. “Let’s imagine it’s a Wednesday. You’re all at luncheon. You sit there, and Aunt Lucy there, and Aunt Clara here;” he arranged three pebbles on the grass between them.

“Aunt Clara carves the neck of lamb,” Rachel continued. She fixed her gaze upon the pebbles. (Woolf 1992:243)

Even Helen Ambrose, the aunt of the protagonist and her appointed chaperone during the girl’s adolescent years, who had remarked the actual presence of savage blood-thirsty instincts in the apparently orderly existence of a society on the verge of international conflict, becomes the target of those primitive cannibalistic drives. The bestialized image of these ladies accurately tallies with the idea of the savage in Michel de Montaigne’s famous 1581 essay “Of Cannibals.” Throughout his study, Montaigne offers his vision of the blurry borders separating the figures of the “cannibal” and the so-called “civilised man.” According to this author, this frontier lies rather on a social construct priming the excellences of civilization than on any real premises:

I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country. As, indeed, we have no other level of truth and reason, than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the place wherein we live [...]. I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead [...].

We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them.

In keeping with Montaigne’s tenets, a reversal of the roles expected from cannibal and civilized person is suggested in Woolf’s novel. The following passage leaves no doubt about the barbarous nature of these ladies, whose lowest instincts become particularly destructive when the prey is of their same sex:

Where emotion was concerned [...] were as flies on a lump of sugar [...]. It wasn’t that they were cruel, or meant to hurt, or even stupid exactly; but [Helen] had always found that the ordinary person had so little emotion in his own life that the scent of it in the lives of others was like the scent of blood in the nostrils of a bloodhound. (Woolf 1992:359)

Surprisingly, masked under the profoundly hypocritical ritual of lunches, teas, or dinners, despite their having “nothing to say” nor “car[ing] a rap for”

the others (Woolf 1992:360), the most cruel and savage instincts emerge. This of course accounts for the understated violence operated within society:

Directly anything happens –it may be a marriage, or a birth, or a death– on the whole they prefer it to be a death –every one wants to see you. They insist upon seeing you. They’ve got nothing to say; they don’t care a rap for you; but you’ve got to go to lunch or to tea or to dinner, and if you don’t you’re damned. It’s the smell of blood. (Woolf 1992)

Furthermore, a meaningfully graphic suggestion occurs through the revolting scene of the chase and later decapitation of a hen. The episode, which takes place concurrently with a conversation about marriage and relationships, becomes loaded with a powerfully transgressing meaning, particularly insofar as it becomes symbolical of the victimization of females in Victorian society. Not accidentally, the scene –which has Rachel as nearly its only witness– takes place in between two of the episodes of sexual approach she undergoes throughout the novel. Consisting of her witnessing of a half-dead hen which, in spite of its attempts to run away from its –significantly– female chasers, ends up being sacrificed, the passage becomes cryptically allegorical of Rachel’s story, at the same time as it entails some of the core clues in the whole narration as well. The worldly Evelyn Mulgatroyd converses with Rachel Vinrace, the naïve and inexperienced protagonist, pretending to ask for the latter’s advice on her male suitors, as she artfully attempts to sexually approach Rachel. Miss Vinrace manages to foil Evelyn’s attempt, just to be again approached and involved in a nearly homo-erotic episode with the elderly Miss Allan. The latter, who undresses in front of Rachel, epitomizes the attempts to force women into a tradition of pretence and silenced truths, as will be discussed later:

The ground was bare, old tins were scattered about, and the bushes wore towels and aprons upon their heads to dry. Every now and then a waiter came out in a white apron and threw rubbish on to a heap. Two large women in cotton dresses were sitting on a bench with blood-smeared tin trays in front of them and yellow bodies across their knees. They were plucking the birds, and talking as they plucked. Suddenly a chicken came floundering, half flying, half running into the space, pursued by a third woman whose age could hardly be under eighty. Although wizened and unsteady on her legs she kept up the chase, egged on by the laughter of the others; her face was expressive of furious rage, and as she ran she swore in Spanish. Frightened by hand-clapping here, a napkin there, the bird ran this way and that in sharp angles, and finally fluttered straight at the old woman, who opened her scanty grey skirts to enclose it, dropped upon it in a bundle, and then holding it out cut its head off with an expression of vindictive energy and triumph combined. The blood and the ugly wriggling fascinated Rachel, so that



although she knew that some one had come up behind and was standing beside her, she did not turn round until the old woman had settled down on the bench beside the others. Then she looked up sharply, because of the ugliness of what she had seen. It was Miss Allan who stood beside her. (Woolf 1992:293-294)

Abundant in scatological details, the unsettling image comprises the simultaneous presence of horror and disgust McElroy had identified as the central elements of grotesque imagery (McElroy 1989:25). This grotesque representation of the female as a repulsive half-dead animal oozing blood juxtaposes the categories established by the patriarchal apprehension of the female as abject and opposed to a male subject (Kristeva 1982:1), at the same time as it constitutes a blunt affirmation of that otherness. The focus on the repulsive aspects of the scene becomes a vindication of a female corporeality which defies any male-imposed labels of “corporeal rubbish,” as a result of the masculine incapacity of accepting the materiality of the body, its limits and cycles, corporeal fluids, or menstrual blood (Grosz 1990:86). Even though Rachel is repulsed by a revolting spectacle of female victimization, it is not as a consequence of “the blood and the ugly wriggling” (Woolf 1992:145), for which she feels fascinated.

In this depiction of a grotesquely bestialized society, underneath the artificial mask of civilization, the narrator underlines the hypocrisy of an apparently civilized European society. Paradoxically, Terence and most of the hotel guests have organized a trip to experience the jungle life, while they remain unaware of the existence of real beastliness underlying the apparently civilized mask of the orderly Victorian society. As Helen ironically remarks on being accused of un-adventurous: “‘oh, no,’ said Helen, ‘one’s only got to use one’s eye. *There’s everything here –everything,*”<sup>6</sup> she repeated [...]” (Woolf 1992:314-315). Hereby, while the blue flags and postcards depicting natives that adorn the English setting in the novel celebrate the advance of imperial dominance and European superiority, the artificers of the bloody massacres underneath turn into the beastly image of “hairy” males, “with muscles like wire, fangs greedy for flesh, and fingers itching for gold” (Woolf 1992:96). Those monstrous conquerors significantly retain a considerable resemblance to the deformed man haunting Rachel’s nightmare after Richard Dalloway has kissed her. They share with the latter the emblematic quality portraying patriarchal oppression in a twofold direction. Hence, whereas Richard becomes a conspirator of the same impious, imperialist hunger moving the conquerors –

---

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added.



“had there been men like Richard Dalloway in the time of Charles the First, the map would undoubtedly be red where it is now an odious green” (Woolf 1992)—a corresponding form of sexual harassment is implied for imperial conquerors, depicted as the corruptors of the female “vessels” the ships metaphorically represent. In this sense, the description of the *Euphrosyne*’s implicit initiation “in the middle of a great bay” becomes intentionally symbolical: “immediately, as if she were a recumbent giant requiring examination, small boats came swarming about her. She rang with cries, men jumped on to her; her deck was thumped by feet” (Woolf 1992:94-95). A further covert allusion to sexual harassment inflicted on women is made by means of the inclusion of the grotesque man in Rachel’s vision. Significantly, he invades Rachel inside a damp, oozing tunnel—reminiscent of female sexual organs. In her hallucinatory episode, she feels intimidated by a “deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails” and a face “pitted and like the face of an animal.”

She must have been very tired for she fell asleep at once, but after an hour or two of dreamless sleep, she dreamt. She dreamt that she was walking down a long tunnel, which grew so narrow by degrees that she could touch the damp bricks on either side. At length the tunnel opened and became a vault; she found herself trapped in it, bricks meeting her wherever she turned, alone with a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails. His face was pitted and like the face of an animal. The wall behind him oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down. Still and cold as death she lay, not daring to move, until she broke the agony by tossing herself across the bed, and woke crying “Oh!”

Light showed her the familiar things: her clothes, fallen off the chair; the water jug gleaming white; but the horror did not go at once. She felt herself pursued, so that she got up and actually locked her door. A voice moaned for her; eyes desired her. (Woolf 1992:81-82)

Here, unlike in the seemingly savage community, the most blatantly phagocytic instincts are operative among individuals—thus the particular significance of Mr. Bax’s sermon at church. The priest’s discourse possesses the political quality of the imperial propaganda delivered by contemporary politicians. Indeed, in her *Three Guineas*, Woolf would explicitly warn against English leaders, who had “for God and Empire [...] written, like the address on a dog collar, round [their] necks” (Woolf 1996:185). A reliable example of Woolf’s complaint is represented by Mr. Bax. Hereby, addressing his audience a discourse more suitable for a “leading article upon topics of general interest in the weekly newspapers” (Woolf 1992:267) than for a homily service, Mr. Bax elaborates a form of imperial propaganda echoing the recommendations “a very dear friend of [his] had told him [about] the success of our rule in India” (Woolf

1992:185). Furthermore, whereas apparently claiming for the fact “that all human beings are very much the same under their skins” (267), his preaching turns out a justification of European hegemony over natives, whom they compel to adopt a “strict code of politeness” (268), as well as continental culture. Ironically acquiring a “more definitely clerical” tone (268), Mr. Bax is depicted as resorting to a pretendedly “innocent craftiness” while haranguing Christians on their duty to support the Empire as a means for contributing to their obligation towards “their fathers” (268). In this sense, Woolf particularly aims to bring down Mr. Bax’s encodedly “innocent clerical campaigns” as potentially dangerous means for “assigning them their duties” towards their “successful” and “brilliant” fathers:

He exhorted [his audience] to keep in touch with men of the modern type; they must sympathise with their multifarious interests in order to keep before their eyes that whatever discoveries were made there was one discovery which could not be superseded, which was indeed as much of a necessity to the most successful and most brilliant of them all as it had been to their fathers. The humblest could help; the least important things had an influence (here his manner became definitely priestly and his remarks seemed to be directed to women, for indeed Mr. Bax’s congregations were mainly composed of women, and he was used to assigning them their duties in his innocent clerical campaigns). (Woolf 1992:268)

Paradoxically, through his promotion of imperial hegemony, based upon race and patriarchal notions of outsidership, the bestialized society operated by the phagocytic thrives Bax warns against is enabled to flourish. Indeed, in his pretendedly naïve imperialist homily, Bax solicits a terrifyingly violent punishment for those who “daily mistake [his] words:”

“Be merciful unto me, O God,” [...] “for man goeth about to devour me: he is daily fighting and troubling me... [...] all that they imagine is to do me evil. They hold all together and keep themselves close... Break their teeth, O God, in their mouths; smite the jaw-bones of the lions, O Lord: let them fall away like water that runneth apace; and when they shoot their arrows let them be rooted out.” (263)

In keeping with the cannibalistic civilization portrayed by Woolf, the priest significantly begs God for protection against devourers, addressing Him through a prayer claiming for God’s exercise of aggressive revenge against enemies. It is precisely through Bax’s paradoxical sermon on the cannibalistic impulses ruling over society that the reality of the beastly savagery of Victorian civilization is revealed. This cannibalization of Victorian society affects as well Mr. Ambrose –Rachel’s acknowledged male tutor. In tune with that primitive

return, he becomes transformed into an irrational being “muttering rhythmically” while “surveying” both his surroundings and his possessions – “his guests and his food and his wife”– “with eyes [...] now melancholy and now fierce” (360). Thereby, in the most jungle-like style, and owing to his reluctance to see his status disempowered, Ridley “abruptly” cuts his wife short spurting “Nonsense, nonsense” (360). This occurs right before the primitive lapse will be masked again with the costumes provided by contemporary patterns of morality and correctness:

She looked about her as if she had called up a legion of human beings, all hostile and all disagreeable, who encircled the table, with mouths gaping for blood, and made it appear a little island of neutral country in the midst of the enemy’s country.

Her words roused her husband, who had been muttering rhythmically to himself, surveying his guests and his food and his wife with eyes that were now melancholy and now fierce, according to the fortunes of the lady in his ballad. He cut Helen short with a protest. He hated even the semblance of cynicism in women. “Nonsense, nonsense,” he remarked abruptly [...]. The talk now turned upon literature and politics, and Ridley told stories of the distinguished people he had known in his youth. Such talk was of the nature of an art, and the personalities and informalities of the young were silenced. (Woolf 1992:360-361)

In the midst of this universe of cannibalistic devouring, where different expiatory figures are appointed, the character of Rachel acquires particular relevance. Already depicted in her dimension as a lamb-figure, Rachel undergoes a type of battering which responds to the sort of victimization experienced by women in Victorian society. In this sense, chiming in with the violence underlying the veils of politeness and the strict observance of civilized attitudes, a form of mauling is inflicted upon Rachel when Richard Dalloway –a character which already appears in Woolf’s first novel– forcefully kisses her: “‘You tempt me’, he said. The tone of his voice was terrifying. He seemed choked in fight” (Woolf 1992:80). Tormented by the “terrifying” experience with this fervent defender of hegemony over the low classes, Rachel is haunted by the nightmarish vision of a “deformed man” (81). The monstrous presence in Rachel’s obsession penetrates a damp, oozing tunnel, thus provoking Rachel’s eventual horror and oppressive feelings (81-82).

If Rachel’s victimization at the hands of women as co-conspirators through their inaction of male dominion has already been pointed out as a form of cannibalistic phagocytation of Miss Vinrace, particular significance entails the second occurrence of the tunnel episode. Placed towards the end of the novel,

this scene reinforces the corrosive perils of female passivity in the context of patriarchal tyranny. Indeed, Woolf was already profoundly concerned with the necessity of taking action –as she had expressed to Janet Case in her letters (Woolf 1976:529). This coincides with a period which was witnessing a massive vindication for female rights –as evidenced by a “concentration on female suffrage [...] unprecedented in feminist history” (Zwerdling 1986:214). The scene situates two deformed women– a mechanically praying nurse and Helen, in charge of preserving the young girl’s purity in its strictest Victorian sense –inside the passage. Whereas this may seem a trivial occurrence, responding to a hallucinatory episode resulting from the narrator’s enfeebled health (Caramagno 1992:157), the simultaneous coincidence of the three female characters entails a crucial relevance within the whole of the narrative, insofar as these three figures epitomize each of the vertices of the triadic matriarchy Jane Harrison identifies in *Themis*. In her work, Harrison envisaged these matriarchal trinities as connected with the yearly rituals of “Carrying Out the Death” that constituted the basis for carnival celebrations (Harrison 1927:68). According to the scholar, this figure originally consisted of the twofold goddess Demeter-Persephone, whereby “the Mother takes the physical side, the Daughter the spiritual” (Harrison 1927:276). The incorporation of its third personality in this episode provides a centripetal point for the convergence of Woolf’s core meanings. Hereby, frequently portrayed as plunging into the depths of the sea, Rachel corresponds to the spiritual side of the goddess (Moore 1984:10), who sets off on an underworld journey so as to promote the renewal of the land. On the other hand, constantly concerned with warding Rachel’s virginity, the stone-like Helen becomes the fictional embodiment of Harrison’s Earth Mother, who “has for her sphere more and more the things of this life, laws and civilized marriage” (*ibid.*).

This additional self entering the plural divine entity corresponds for Harrison to the *Keres* or tiny grotesque “winged women [or] demons, hurrying like the storm wind and carrying all things to destruction” (Carpentier 1998:176). Later evolved into Harpies, or Snatchers, these witch-like females become associated with the nurturing Earth-mother, aiding her in the final accomplishment of the death and devastation that is to enable the regeneration of the crops. Endowed with the multiplicity that is inherent to carnival imagery, these goddesses also possess the indefiniteness and ambivalence of simultaneously evoking the fear of approaching death and the praise of forthcoming life (Carpentier 1998:185). Hence, insofar as it represents a variation of the previous tunnel episode, the replacement of the grotesque male by the two women introduces a homoerotic dimension into the regenerative

frame (Smith 1997:128-145). Thus, the inclusion of the two women – symbolically situated within Rachel’s uterine passage– invokes the necessity of accomplishing a real sexual liberation, once different possibilities for that sexual encounter have been displayed throughout those parallel episodes. It would be a way to go beyond the hypocritical pretences aiming to conform to artificial forms of categorization which by the end of the nineteenth century became “a central symbol of revolt against the upper classes and the society of exchange values and polar oppositions they had fostered” (Gilbert and Gubar 1989:326).

On the other hand, it should be noted that this scene does not obey an indiscriminate apology of transvestism as the weapon for the liberation from those constraining models. Actually, no evident signs of homoerotic tendencies are portrayed for Rachel, who, inversely, suffers the harassment of other women’s lesbian desires. Hence, the liberal Evelyn asks her upstairs to her room, where she employs her worldliness and the necessity of commitment with the feminist cause in her attempt to seduce the inexperienced Rachel:

[Evelyn] was in a state of great excitement, and the muscles of her arms were twitching nervously [...].

“I’ve never met a man that was fit to compare with a woman!” she cried; [...] dabbing her wet cheeks with a towel. Tears were now running down with the drops of cold water.

“It makes me angry [...]. There’s only one man here I really like,” Evelyn continued; “Terence Hewet. One feels as if one could trust him [...].”

“Why?” she asked. “Why can you trust him?”

“I don’t know,” said Evelyn. “Don’t you have feelings about people? Feelings you’re absolutely certain are right? I had a long talk with Terence the other night. I felt we were really friends after that. There’s something of a woman in him” –She paused as though she were thinking of very intimate things that Terence had told her, [...] in another moment Evelyn was saying that the finest men were like women, and women were nobler than men [...].

“I play,” [...]. Evelyn laughed. “We none of us do anything but play. And that’s why women like Lillah Harrison, who’s worth twenty of you and me, have to work themselves to the bone. But I’m tired of playing,” she went on, lying flat on the bed, and raising her arms above her head. Thus stretched out, she looked more diminutive than ever [...]. She put her hand on Rachel’s knee [...]. “Being real, whatever Mr. Hirst may say. Are you real?”

Rachel felt much as Terence had felt that Evelyn was too close to her, and that there was something exciting in this closeness, although it was also

disagreeable [...]. But she did not want advice; she wanted intimacy [...]. [S]he could not help seeing that Rachel was not thinking about her [...]. Evelyn was tormented by the little spark of life in her which was always trying to work through [...] people, and was always being rebuffed [...].

“It’s odd. People talk as much about love as they do about religion.”

“I wish you’d sit down and talk.” (Woolf 1992:286-292)

Another tentative seducer of Miss Vinrace, old Miss Allan, is presented as a kind of grotesque bug –“the upper half of her body now became grey with black stripes on it” (Woolf 1992:298)– not different from the passengers “swarming like aimless ants” (29) or the “insect-like figures of Dalloway, Ambroses, and Vinraces,” expressedly “derided” by the narrator (94). In her obsessive attempt to obtain sexual favours from Rachel, Miss Allan covertly attempts to cast a form of bewitchery upon Rachel.<sup>7</sup> Tempting the young lady through her offer of preserved ginger to extract the root from a jar, the woman insistently invites her to “add a new pleasure to life” (295), as she seems to predict Rachel’s duty to do so before finding herself on her death-bed.<sup>8</sup> Thus, on Rachel’s repulse of her offer –“Rachel bit the ginger and at once cried, ‘I must spit it out!’”– a new attempt is undertaken by the artful old woman (296). Miss Allan’s second endeavour will be similarly presided over by the element of the glass, whereby the sly elderly woman tries giving her a drink from a “slim elegant jar filled with a bright green fluid” (296), evocative of the persistence of tradition throughout generations:

“Let me see –I have nothing else to offer you, unless you would like to taste this.” A small cupboard hung above her bed, and she took out of it a slim elegant jar filled with a bright green fluid.

“Creme de Menthe,” she said. “Liqueur, you know. It looks as if I drank, doesn’t it? As a matter of fact it goes to prove what an exceptionally abstemious person I am. I’ve had that jar for six-and-twenty years,” she added, looking at it with pride, as she tipped it over, and from the height of the liquid it could be seen that the bottle was still untouched.

“Twenty-six years?” Rachel exclaimed.

<sup>7</sup> Carpentier points out the frequent presence of the witch in association with jars or vases from whence she escapes to bring forth destruction. In this sense, particular significance is entailed throughout the novel by glass allusions and their connection with these episodes of Rachel’s victimage at the hands of her elders (1999: 79).

<sup>8</sup> Note the grotesque recreation here of the canonical Elizabethan plot by the substitution of the young, handsome male lover, now replaced with an ugly, artful old crone.

Miss Allan was gratified, for she had meant Rachel to be surprised. (Woolf 1992:296)

Symbolically appearing “on the eve of any foreign journey” (Woolf 1992:296), the bottle epitomizes a talismanic omen for good fortune in Miss Allan’s presentation of homoerotic initiation into sexuality –“I consider it a kind of charm against accidents” (Woolf 1992:296).

Contrary to Rachel’s engagement to Terence –a fact not so much linked to her function as the matronly figure (Leaska 1977:14), as to the evidence of the impossible satisfaction of her lesbian desires (Smith 1997:183) –Helen is determined to accomplish her revenge. Thus, in a passage critics have agreed on as one of the most cryptic in Woolf’s narrative, Helen explicitly prompts Rachel’s descent –an action Rachel will feel as a condemnatory “bolt from Heaven” (Woolf 1992:330). Moreover, it is precisely once darkness has concurrently descended (Woolf 1992:322) and the homosexuality of Rachel’s fiancé has been revealed that her removal becomes definitely urgent:

A hand dropped abrupt as iron on Rachel’s shoulder; it might have been a bolt from heaven. She fell beneath it, and the grass whipped across her eyes and filled her mouth and ears. Through the waving stems she saw a figure, large and shapeless against the sky. Helen was upon her. Rolled this way and that, now seeing only forests of green, and now the high blue heaven; she was speechless and almost without sense. (Woolf 1992:330)

Once the heterosexual coupling between Terence and Rachel has proved its artificiality –on the grounds of the young man’s covert homosexuality– a form of sexual approach to Rachel is initiated by Helen, with whom the girl suddenly starts rolling on the floor “this way and that, now seeing only forests of green, and now the high blue heaven,” leaving Rachel “speechless” with panting “and almost without sense” (Woolf 1992:331). Initially suggesting an implicit form of homoerotic intimacy between the two women, the first sight Rachel experiences while still “panting” from her experience is of “two great heads, the heads of a man and a woman, of Terence and Helen” (Woolf 1992:331), who kiss in front of her in what turns out a kind of parody of conventional norms and marriage:

Both were flushed, both laughing, and the lips were moving; they came together and kissed in the air above her. Broken fragments of speech came down to her on the ground. She thought she heard them speak of love and then of marriage. Raising herself and sitting up, [Rachel] too realized Helen’s soft body, the strong and hospitable arms, and happiness swelling and breaking in one vast wave. When this fell away, and the grasses once more



lay low, and the sky became horizontal, and the earth rolled out flat on each side, and the trees stood upright. (Woolf 1992:331)

Furthermore, allusive of an orgiastic mingling of the man and the two women, no sooner has the kiss occurred than a form of orgasmic embrace takes place between Rachel and Helen. Bluntly subversive, insofar as it represents a radical disruption of the Victorian sacredness of moral norms and values, the experience becomes crucial inasmuch as it enables their participants a complete liberation from established perspectives. Thereby, even though already standing, a turned-round angle of reality is adopted by Rachel, thus debunking any conventional focalizations.

The scene of the orgiastic encounter affirms the necessity of true self-realization and the erasure of boundaries as a means of liberation from the devouring jaws of the Victorian evil of institutionalized hypocrisy. Furthermore, the enigmatic episode provides an additional clue to another element in *The Voyage Out*. Accordingly, the suggestion of a possible threesome among Terence and the two women –significantly “squatting on the ground in *triangular*<sup>9</sup> shapes” (Woolf 1992:331) –provides a sense of unity for the recurring presence of those triangular elements throughout the narrative.

In a powerful symbolical scene, it is precisely on “expound[ing] her views of the human race” that Helen contemplated with complacency the “pyramid of variegated fruits in the centre of the table” (Woolf 1992:359-360). Moreover, at the same time as a metaphorical form of engulfing genitals, in tune with the suggestion of the *vagina dentata* (Freud 1962:216), the pyramidal magnolia tree wherein Helen envisions Hirst becomes a confirmation of St John’s sexual ambiguity as a likely candidate for these orgiastic merging. Simultaneously, Helen cryptically invites the scholar to opt for the Bar which, throughout the narrative, stands allegorical of a free self-realization of his sexuality, instead of the constraining rules of institutional Cambridge:

“What about the five philosophers?” said Helen, with a laugh, stitching firmly and swiftly at her canvas. “I wish you’d describe them” [...]. They gave him, certainly, what no woman could give him, not Helen even. Warming at the thought of them, he went on to lay his case before Mrs. Ambrose. Should he stay on at Cambridge or should he go to the Bar? One day he thought one thing, another day another. Helen listened attentively. At last, without any preface, she pronounced her decision.

---

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added.

“Leave Cambridge and go to the Bar,” she said. He pressed her for her reasons.

“I think you’d enjoy London more,” she said.

[...] “Well, you must take the responsibility,” he said. “I’ve made up my mind; I shall go to the Bar.”

His words were very serious, almost emotional; they recalled Helen after a second’s hesitation.

“I’m sure you’re right,” she said warmly, and shook the hand he held out. “You’ll be a great man, I’m certain.” (Woolf 1992:234-236)

This entangled landscape reflects an unhindered projection of the tameness of English forests. Through this grotesque reconstruction of the orderly English landscape, the narrator ironically mocks the imperialist eagerness for transforming the colonized territory into a mimetic reproduction of the dominator’s surroundings –on the grounds of the above discussed assumption of the colonizer’s superiority, as opposed to the savagery and irrationality of the colonized. At the same time, Woolf validates a more democratic and unmarked socio-political and ideological re-organization. In this defiant panorama, the conventional perfection and neatness of the island’s trees are replaced by the irregular shape of “the tropical bushes with their sword-like leaves” (315). Simultaneously, presided by the discontinuous overlapping of green and yellow lights, the jungle landscape becomes evocative of the form of multiple reality Woolf indefatigably vindicates for –“it is well known how [...] the self splits up and one self is eager and dissatisfied and the other stern and philosophical” (Woolf 1942:12). In view of this, the green and yellow pattern in the native land allegorizes the individual’s concealed ambiguous nature as represented by Hirst, whose eyes symbolically reflect a similar chromaticity. Indeed, it is at the very moment when he tries to avoid Terence and Rachel’s coupling that we realize his homoerotic *alter ego* glimmers behind: “into his eyes as he looked up at them had come yellow and green reflections from the sky and the branches, robbing them of their intentness, and he seemed to think what he did not say” (Woolf 1942:12).

Bearing this in mind, if in the primitive carnivals described by both Harrison and Frazer the coming prosperity is heralded through the hope of rain, once Rachel’s sacrifice has taken place, a haloed moon announces the promise of the coming rain. Some critics, like Moore, have associated this specific rendering of the moon with the virginal presence of Rachel (Moore 1984:103 n. 13). In any case, a majestic quality characterizes now the celestial body, in the midst of a suggested re-emergence from the depths of the water:

The windows were uncurtained, and showed the moon, and a long silver pathway upon the surface of the waves.

“Why,” he said, in his ordinary tone of voice, “look at the moon. There’s a halo round the moon. We shall have rain to-morrow.” (Woolf 1992:412-413)

The long-desired coming of the rain –“one’s quite forgotten what rain looks like” (Woolf 1992:426)– soon dissolves the oppressive landscape:

All that evening the clouds gathered, until they closed entirely over the blue of the sky. They seemed to narrow the space between earth and heaven, so that there was no room for the air to move in freely; and the waves, too, lay flat, and yet rigid, as if they were restrained. The leaves on the bushes and trees in the garden hung closely together, and the feeling of pressure and restraint was increased by the short chirping sounds which came from birds and insects. (Woolf 1992:429)

Simultaneously, accompanied by a wind symbolic of forthcoming change, a new panorama comes over with “the clearing of the darkness and the light drumming of the rain upon the roof,” which carries away from them “the great confused ocean of air, [...] passing high over head with its clouds and its rods of fire, out to sea” (Woolf 1992:431). A process of renewal has occurred among the characters. Hence, significantly embraced by either “the arm of man or of woman” (Woolf 1992:426), a new form of liberated self-realization is suggested for Terence, at the same time as the open sincerity between Evelyn and Mr. Perrott stands for the end of hypocritical preferences. Thus, having heard Perrott’s love declaration, Evelyn resolves to honestly express her intention of merely staying friends with the gentleman:

“That’s splendid!” Evelyn exclaimed, grasping his hand. “Now you’ll go back and start all kinds of things and make a great name in the world; and we’ll go on being friends, whatever happens... we’ll be great friends, won’t we?”

“Evelyn!” he moaned suddenly, and took her in his arms, and kissed her. She did not resent it, although it made little impression on her.

As she sat upright again, she said, “I never see why one shouldn’t go on being friends –though some people do. And friendships do make a difference, don’t they? They are the kind of things that matter in one’s life?” (Woolf 1992:427-428)

Furthermore, explicit reference to Rachel’s arising as the emerging Queen is made through the chess-game initiated after the storm. Accordingly, in tune with her function as the young figure and carrier of prosperity after the old and rotting set of conventions has been debunked, Rachel is proclaimed as the

newly-raised Queen of the celebration. Through her the defeat of the priggish and misogynist Pepper becomes accomplished: “it was the move with your Queen that gave it away, Pepper,” exclaimed Mr. Elliot” (437).

As has been discussed throughout this essay, in her first novel Woolf already portrayed the situation of decay and waste pervading the obsolete panorama of Victorian society. Indeed, focused through the lenses of grotesque parameters, the blunt inadequacy of the patriarchal basis on which this society stands, as well as the imperialistic and profoundly gender-biased principles upon which it operates are unmasked. Once exposed in its unveiled reality, the absolute senselessness of patriarchal structures come to the surface, as well as the whole complex of a self-destructive society on the grounds of the hegemonic action of tyrannical leaders. Moreover, spreading its radius over the whole of society, this dictatorial victimization is not only perpetrated by male champions of the system, but also by tradition-anchored women supporting it. Accordingly, whereas both types of figures stand as ridiculously unfit, it is only by means of the subversive rise of the female –as the source of regenerative potential– that hope in a renovated reality can be conceived of.

## REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *La Cultura Popular en la Edad Media y en el Renacimiento. El Contexto de François Rabelais*. Tr. Julio Forcat and César Conroy. Madrid: Alianza, 1984a.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Tr. Caryl Emerson. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984b.
- Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen, eds. *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Caramagno, Thomas C. *The Flight of the Mind. Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1992.
- Carpentier, Martha C. *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1998.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Tr. James Strachey. Basic Books: New York, 1962.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2. Sexchanges. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Ginsburg, Ruth. “The Pregnant Text. Bakhtin's Ur-Chronotope: The Womb.” *Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects*. Ed. David Shepherd. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993: 165-176.

- Grosz, Elizabeth. "The Body of Signification." *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*. Eds. John Fletcher & Benjamin Andrew. London: Routledge, 1990: 80-103.
- Harrison, Jane. *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927.
- Jáuregui, Carlos A. *Canibalia. Canibalismo, canibalismo, antropofagia cultural y consumo en América Latina*. Argentina: Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert, 2008: 14-15.
- Kilgour, Maggie. *From Communion to Cannibalism. An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Leaska, Michelle Alexander. *The Novels of Virginia Woolf. From Beginning to End*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977.
- Lyons, Paul. "Lines of Fright: Fear, Perception and the 'Seen' of Cannibalism in Charles Wilkes's Narrative and Herman Melville's Typee." *Body Trade: Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Eds. Barbara Creed and Jeannette Hoorn. Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2001: 126-148.
- McElroy, Bernard. *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. London, 1989.
- Montaigne, Michel. "IV: Of Cannibals." *Essays of Michel Montaigne*. Tr. Charles Cotton. <<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/montaigne/montaigne-essays--2.html>>
- Moore, Madeline. "Between the Acts and Anon." *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1984: 146-176.
- Shipman, Pat. "The Myths and Perturbing Realities of Cannibalism." *Discover* 8.3 (1987): 70-76.
- Smith, Patricia Juliana. "'The Things People Don't Say': Lesbian Panic in *The Voyage Out*." *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*. Ed. E. Barrett and Patricia Cramer. New York: New York University Press, 1997: 128-145.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Voyage Out*. Ed. Frank Kermode. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- . *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. London: Hogarth Press, 1942.
- . *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1975-80), II: 1912-1922: The Question of Things Happening, 1976.
- . *Three Guineas*. Ed. Hermione Lee. London: Vintage, 1996.
- Zwerdling, Alex. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

*How to cite this article:*

Andrés Cuevas, Isabel M<sup>a</sup>. “Killing Me Softly with her Fangs: The Role of Female Victimage and Cannibalism in *The Voyage Out*.” *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 31 (2010): 7-27.

*Author's contact:* iandres@ugr.es