

Personality Analysis of Virginia Woolf

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Introduction:

Virginia Woolf was born on January 25, 1882 in London, England. Woolf was a very famous and renowned writer who also worked towards women's rights. She ultimately was a pioneer for women. She had been diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and Anorexia. Despite her hardships, she ended up marrying Leonard Woolf after several years. Initially, she turned down two proposals prior to Leonard. Leonard returned to Virginia after a 7-year absence. They had not spoken at all during this time period. He was very determined to marry her and their intimacy grew fast. She turned his down first proposal in January of 1912. He asked again in May and she hesitated. She tried to give him reasons for not marrying, saying her mind was unstable and said she might become a burden to him. Virginia said, "I feel angry sometimes at the strength of your desire". This type of reaction may suggest that she might have been unable to reciprocate. On May 29, she finally accepted his proposal, and they were married on August 10, 1912 (Nicholson, 2000).

In 1913, Virginia attempted suicide for the second time in her life. She swallowed 100 veronal tablets, which were supposed to be there to help her sleep. In February 1915, she had her last and most extreme breakdown. Leonard described her condition as "a nightmare world of frenzy, despair, and violence" (Nicholson, 2000). From time to time she grew too ill to work. During the summer of 1921 she was bedridden so often with many headaches and sleeplessness, signaling a breakdown approaching (Nicholson, 2000). Her fame was becoming more of a disability than a reward. It meant constant interruptions, letters from strangers, requests for interview, photographs, and autographs. Woolf said, "I like it when people actually come, but I

love it when they go” (Nicholson, 2000). Almost to the end of her life, Virginia was capable of enjoyment and intensive work. Her diary offers some clues into her dark emotions. She used the phrase “in a trough of despair” a lot in her diary entries, and she also wrote, “I shall conquer this mood, and I will go down with flying colors” (Nicholson, 2000). In his autobiography, Leonard says that he didn’t see any signs of her illness progressing until January 1941 and it was not until January 25 that she showed the first signs of “serious mental disturbance”. Virginia knew she was going mad, but believed that it would not go away this time around. There was nobody with whom she could discuss it, or so she felt. Leonard knew what was going on but felt if he bothered her or closely monitored her she would kill herself immediately. On Friday, March 28, 1941 she went to the garden lodge where she always liked to go, wrote Leonard a second letter, and midday, walked the half mile to the River Ouse, and placed a large stone in the pocket of her fur coat. Then she threw herself into the water and forced herself to drown. She left 3 suicide notes behind. Nicholson believes she wrote all three on the day of the suicide. From the letters, evidence concludes that she attempted to kill herself about ten days prior, on March 18, 1941. The last words of *The Waves*, one of her writings, was made as her epitaph. It read, “Against you I will fling myself unvanquished and unyielding, O Death.”

Neurotic Behaviors

An approach that would be sufficient in analyzing the personality of Virginia Woolf would be the Single-Trait approach, which encompasses The Big Five. The Big Five consists of the five basic dimensions of personality.

A trait of the Big Five that Woolf demonstrates in Neuroticism. With neuroticism comes emotional instability and negative emotionality. Some aspects of neuroticism that she exhibited are: 1) Strong and negative reactions to stress, 2) Sensitivity to social threats, 3) being anxious and stressed, 4) Negatively correlated with happiness, well-being and physical health, 5) General tendency towards psychopathology, and 5) life outcomes include problems in family relationships, dissatisfied with jobs, etc. Neuroticism can sometimes be found in individuals with bipolar disorder.

These aspects of neuroticism are clearly exhibited in her life experiences. She showed instability in family relationships. Her half- brother had molested her and her younger sisters. Her father and mother died when she was 22, and she felt a lot of guilt and grief from not showing her father enough love before he died. She now had to be alone to live life with her half-brother, who had sexually abused Virginia and her sisters. The sexual abuse advanced after their mother's passing. Virginia had a fear of her own marriage. Sometimes this is seen in people who have trauma or bad experiences with men in their lives that they are close with, lead to fear in relationships and instability. Her adolescent trauma seems like it brought her closer to psychopathology. Woolf was said to have developed Anorexia Nervosa in the 1920's, especially after the death of her parents and her starvation as a negative coping mechanisms. She was "assuming delusional proportions and her preoccupations were full of self-hatred, and a body-image that was immensely negative and distorted. She also had struggles about power and authority with her caretakers" (Caramagno, 1989).

She had a lot of anxiety and had a negative emotionality in general. This came out in most of her writing and novels. She spoke so frequently about suicide in her writings. It is believed that Woolf wrote most often during her manic episodes, making her impulsive, and

giving her a flood of ideas. It seems as if she was affected by the World War II bombing of London because she speaks of it in her writing.

Manic-depressive illness (Bipolar Disorder) is known for episodes of mania, and episodes of depression. Woolf had both. She talked fast, suffered acute headaches, heard strange voices, and she also could not sleep and would not eat. She was sensitive to the criticism she received from the public with her writing and to negative events, such as bereavement and the death of her parents. Following their death, she broke down, refused to eat, and attempted to kill herself. This was clearly a failure to grieve sufficiently. However, she became a writer who wrote without fear of displeasing men, however, she was never happy. Bell writes, "...Woolf's personality was even in times of happiness and health, by no means everyone's ideal of spiritual grace. She loved gossip, she told tales, not always true ones; she made mischief..." (Bell, 1979). This also exhibits her creative side, as well as showing that she was very unbalanced. Bell claims that she thought people were laughing at her, and unable to differentiate between her "subjective word" and what others might call, "the objective" (Bell, 1979). According to Shirley Panken, "Woolf evidenced character traits of a "mixed" variety, 'depressive, obsessive, masochistic, psychosomatic', that her 'agitated depression and suicidal bent suggest early traumatic deprivation, a lifelong affective or cyclothymic disposition.'" Some would say that Woolf harmed herself or exhibited destructive behaviors as a form of punishment from her early adolescent trauma.

Creativity and emotionality

The psychoanalytic theory can be used to analyze Woolf's personality through observing defense mechanisms that she may have used. Panken suggests that "bipolar" personalities are

highly prone to denial of psychic pain. However, the defense mechanism that it seems Woolf used the most is projection. According to Funder, the defense mechanism of projection is attributing an unwanted impulse or attribute in oneself to other people (Funder, 2013). She was an astonishing writer, and all of her writing alluded to death, grief, and sadness. Most of the characters she created and wrote about are characters that had experienced similar feelings and traumas as she did. One of her most famous characters, Clarissa from *Mrs. Dalloway*, exhibited extreme depression. She was sensitive and very unbalanced. She was also very impulsive, like Woolf, who's extreme impulsivity came from her manic symptoms. In the novel, she grew incredibly thin, alluding to Woolf and her anorexia. In her Clarissa also suffered suicide loss (Woolf, 1925). Like Septimus, a character in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in 1904, Virginia threw herself from a window in attempted suicide (Nicholson, 2000). This may have been a projection of some of her own suicidal feeling, thoughts, and experiences. In the novel, I noticed that Woolf used the phrase, "the death of the soul" very repetitively. Considering her constant depressive thoughts, the use of this phrase in her writing shows her underlying emotions.

Conclusion:

Woolf displayed neuroticism throughout her life, especially in her early life experiences. This was seen in her childhood, in her professional life, her literary work, as well as in her interpersonal relationships. The psychoanalytic theory helps to explain the way Woolf dealt with her emotions and hardships, by using the projection defense mechanism. She used her talents in combination with her emotions to ultimately create beautiful, meaningful work as a way of coping. Woolf was influential to many women, and her writings are still widely known today.

Her passion for literature and writing inspired many. She is also one of the earliest known public figures to have a known mental illness, especially bipolar disorder, so she is spoken about in many areas of psychology.

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