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The Woman with the Still Camera: Photographs in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

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Abstract

The advent of photography and the emergence of Modernism in literature are imbued with an essence of breaking away from the past. Photography shares with the Modernist aesthetic a similar mode of appropriating reality. As the photographs capture within the frames a particular moment in the flow of time and establish a distinct ethic of perception, Modernist literature also fixes the focus on certain crucial moments in the life of an individual (for example a day in the life of Leopold Bloom or Mrs. Dalloway) and presents a holistic view of reality in its essential fragments. The incorporation of photographs within the Modernist aesthetic marks the emergence of a new mode of dialogue between fiction and reality. The paper attempts to investigate this mode of dialogue by investigating the interaction among reality, photographs and literature in the works of one of the proponents of Modernism, Virginia Woolf.

[**Keywords:** Modernism, Photographs, Realism, Virginia Woolf, Death.]

The very earliest years of Modernism saw the emergence of a particular technological innovation, photography. Even in its infancy, with the Calotype and the Daguerreotype, photography showed potential for forever transforming the way of perceiving reality. It amazed people how photographs were able to capture every minute detail of a scene and for the first time it was felt that the whole world could be captured within frames. The invention of photography marks a distinct disjunction from the time when photography was not invented:

“The very existence of a modern period, broken away from the time before, is to some extent the creation of photography, which has made all time since the 1840s simultaneously available in a way that makes the years before seem that much more remote.” (North 3)

The same spirit of rupture, which is present in the history of the advent of photography, can also be recognized in the attitude that Modernist literature had assumed towards its immediate predecessors by advocating the implementation of highly conscious artifice, revolutionary usage of linguistic forms and other radical literary techniques. Having identified this similarity, Modernist writers were soon interested in this new form of technology and photography gained a turbulent admission in the world of art amidst positive and negative reactions. Charles Baudelaire condemned photography for its unimaginative realist mode (North 14). Ezra Pound seems to share Baudelaire's disdain for photography and voices his contempt for cinema as well. But his experiments with the vortoscope affirm that despite his attempts he was not able to keep photography entirely

out of his artistic endeavours (North 27). On the other hand, distinct photographic qualities became apparent in the writings of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. Joyce, inspired by the thriving cinematic climate of Trieste, opened the first movie-house in Dublin, the 'Cinematograph Volta', in 1909. In 1926 Virginia Woolf "wrote the first British essay on avant-garde cinema." (Humm 214)

In 'The Cinema', Woolf attempted to absolve cinema of the accusation of being an inferior mimetic form of art by highlighting its potential to portray psychic realities in a purely Modernist manner:

"Then, as smoke pours from Vesuvius, we should be able to see thought in its wildness, in its beauty, in its oddity, pouring from men with their elbows on a table; from women with their little handbags slipping to the floor."

The essay reflects Woolf's intense awareness about contemporary cinematic innovations. The root of her interest in contemporary visual culture could be traced in her preference for photography to which she garnered an attachment since childhood. After becoming an established writer, she was photographed by Man Ray in 1927 (Mephram 117) and also by Vogue's photographer Maurice Beck. The records in Leonard Woolf's diary for frequent expenses for photography reveal that Woolf occasionally occupied the position behind the lens as well (Humm 217). Her passion for photography often influenced her writings. She had arranged for Vita Sackville-West to be photographed as the protagonist of *Orlando* (1928), who oscillates between male and female gender identities. In *Freshwater* (1935), her great-aunt, the famous photographer Julia Margaret Cameron appears as a pivotal character. In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf resorts to photographic quotations to formulate her arguments. Photographs are inevitable constituents of the settings in all of Woolf's novels. But it is in her Modernist writings, beginning with *Jacob's Room*, that the incorporation of photographs in the narrative corroborates her Modernist aesthetic. Therefore, it is interesting to examine the treatment of photographs in the first three Modernist novels of Woolf- *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.¹

Jacob's Room

Jacob's Room (1922), often identified as Woolf's Modernist reworking of the traditional biography and *bildungsroman*, marks Woolf's departure from the conventional realism of *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919). The various stages of Jacob's life are presented in disjointed fragments as the chapters provide glimpses of the different periods of Jacob's life- his childhood in Scarborough, his subsequent life in Cambridge or his long holiday in France, Italy and Greece. Instead of portraying the character of Jacob from a singular, unified standpoint, the narrator crystallizes numerous points of view and

¹ Woolf starts drifting into a new mode of writing with *The Waves* (1931) and the experiment witnesses its culmination in *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941). Therefore these novels reside beyond the scope of this paper.

builds up the character. This technique refuses the reader full comprehension of Jacob's inner self and it remains an enigma. Hermione Lee points out that:

“There is always a conflict in the novel between the wealth of detail and a sense that life cannot be pinned down by detail.” (Lee 82)

The narrator, instead of directly introducing the reader to Jacob's tastes and preferences, offers a catalogue of the objects that populate Jacob's room, so that the reader can make his own inferences about Jacob's way of life:

“Jacob's room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table lay paper ruled with a red margin—an essay, no doubt—“Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?” There were books enough; very few French books; but then anyone who's worth anything reads just what he likes, as the mood takes him, with extravagant enthusiasm. Lives of the Duke of Wellington, for example; Spinoza; the works of Dickens; the *Faery Queen*; a Greek dictionary with the petals of poppies pressed to silk between the pages; all the Elizabethans.” (Woolf 36)

The books in Jacob's room testify to his intellectual interest which ranges from literature to philosophy to history. The title of the essay in progress reveals Jacob's propensity of questioning the existing social traditions and curiously echoes Woolf's own concern about the marginalization of women in history and literature. The description of Jacob's room is principally concerned with those elements which directly contribute to Jacob's intellectual endeavours. The almost transitory mention that the photograph of Jacob's mother finds in this catalogue ironically highlights the peripheral existence of women in society that Jacob seems to be complaining about.

The brief narratorial glance at the photograph of Jacob's mother does not inform the reader whether the photo records an important event in the life of Betty Flanders or whether it is an uneventful, quotidian portrait. According to Susan Sontag:

“Memorializing the achievements of individuals considered as members of families (as well as of other groups) is the earliest popular use of photography.” (Sontag 12)

The figure of Betty Flanders fails to come to the forefront as it remains unknown whether the photograph recounts any of her 'achievements'. The narrator's silence about the content of the photograph diminishes the essence of the same and it is reduced to just another object on the mantelpiece, signifying the marginalized existence of its subject.

However, the presence of the photograph in Jacob's room, regardless of its subject matter, serves another very different purpose. The image of death appears at multiple junctures in the novel which ultimately culminates in Jacob's untimely death in the Great War. Among the objects present in the room, the photograph, by virtue of its very nature, serves as a memento mori. Roland Barthes exposes the inherent 'catastrophic' nature of photographs:

“In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder... It is because each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death that each one, however attached it seems to be to the excited world of the living, challenges each of us, one by one, outside of any generality (but not outside of any transcendence).” (Barthes 97)

The moment captured in a photograph is always a moment of the past. Although the photograph transfixes a particular moment within its frames, yet it actually emphasizes our sheer inability to resist the progression of time. The photograph on the mantelpiece in Jacob’s room similarly acts as a mark of the flow of time and foreshadows Jacob’s impending death.

The sense of death implicit in a photograph becomes even more apparent in Florinda’s photograph of the tombstone under which she believes her father is buried. The act of transfixing a moment in a photograph contradicts the essential fluidity of life. The moment captured in the photograph declares the death of the said moment because it is inevitable that the subsequent moments, which reside beyond the scope of the photograph, are not going to be the same. The photograph is made possible by assigning to the moment caught within the frames a kind of stasis, or “a deathlike immobility” (North 31), which opposes the flow of time and evokes the sense of an ending. The image of the tombstone signifies death, captured in a medium which is itself, according to Sontag, an “inventory of mortality” (Sontag 60). Thus Florinda’s photograph interestingly becomes an embodiment of the universal essence of photography. The idea of death intrinsic to a photograph is further emphasized by the basically perishable nature of the photograph. The forces of nature leave unavoidable signs of decay on the surface of the photograph and it gradually fades away. The tombstone, which is supposed to commemorate death till eternity, gets entrapped in the ephemerality of the medium of photography. Thus even the sign of death is denied perpetuity. Death itself becomes the all-pervading presence which nullifies the efficacy of the various activities carried out by the characters. Dismissive of the transience of the photograph and hence of the object contained therein, Florinda ironically tries to permanently locate the roots of her identity in the photograph of the tombstone. But it is only able to affirm the uncertainty of her identity. Florinda’s urge to discover a specific significance of the photograph is only characteristic of photography. Pierre Bourdieu states:

“A photograph, even a figurative one, is rejected when no function can immediately be assigned to it...One expects photography to give a narrative symbolism, and as a sign or, more precisely, an *allegory*, unequivocally to express a transcendental meaning.” (Bourdieu 105)

The lack of a definite identity weakens the foundation of Florinda’s self and her want of intellection and constancy are gradually revealed. Just like the photograph her relationship with Jacob remains a short-lived affair as Jacob accidentally sees her with another lover.

In a larger context the photograph of the tombstone contributes to intensify the immanence of death in the novel. Jacob’s childhood passions, his Cambridge education,

his occupation in London, his numerous romantic engagements remain disparate episodes in his life and before they can collectively function towards achieving a definitive goal, his life meets a premature end at the warfront. The novel rather than tracing the linear progression of Jacob's life, depicts it as a "luminous halo" (Woolf 224) and the presence of the two photographs, with their innate message of death, indicate the possibility that this "halo" might get extinguished any moment.

Mrs. Dalloway

In *Jacob's Room* Woolf had attempted to explore the self of Jacob Flanders by portraying disparate episodes of his life which did not offer a direct, unhindered glance at the inner world of Jacob, but aided the reader to know Jacob by making assumptions about his inner self. In her next novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf invented the 'tunnelling process' (Woolf 54) and created an interconnection among the characters by occasional fragmentary reminiscence of a common past. As the result of weaving one strand of past events with another, one character gradually acquires a particular design in the memory of another. This 'prime discovery' (Woolf 54) allowed the reader a different view of the interiority of the characters. Photographs, as a repository of the past, play a crucial role in building up and strengthening the interconnection among the pivotal events of the past.

In the course of the novel Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, Richard Dalloway, Sally Saton and some of the other characters individually recall the days they had spent together in the countryside of Bourton. These recollections contribute to the development of the characters. After having recently returned to London from his colonial service in India, Peter Walsh often finds himself reminiscing of the time in Bourton when he had been in love with Clarissa. Waking up from a nap in Regent's Park, he tries to remember what he had been dreaming about and it gradually comes back to him:

"It was at Bourton that summer, early in the nineties, when he was so passionately in love with Clarissa." (Woolf 65)

The outhouses, stables, horses of the humble Parry estate flash in Peter's memory. As Peter thinks about the stable boys and the old coachman, he remembers about an old nurse, "old Moody, Old Goody, some such name they called her, whom one was taken to visit in a little room with lots of photographs, lots of bird-cages..." (Woolf 67). In Peter's prolonged rumination about Clarissa, this brief mention of the nurse reflects his indifference towards the working class, which is shared by Clarissa as well. In the world of the aristocratic gentry, the working class nurse spends a marginalized life in her 'little room'. The presence of the bird-cages symbolizes her entrapment within her own class and annuls any possibility of mobility to a higher class. The juxtaposition of the bird-cages and the photographs signifies that the nurse did not confer any special artistic value on the photographs to utilise them as objects of embellishment for the room. According to Pierre Bourdieu the working class remains largely unaffected by the disputed artistic value of photography (Bourdieu 88). That the nurse does not attempt to perceive the

photographs as works of art and gives them no more attention than she gives to the bird-cages, emphasizes the fact that she belongs to the working class. The brief mention in Peter's memory of the nurse from the past draws one's attention to Peter's present indifference to the working class. Peter seems to value his position of power and expects reverence from others for the post of colonial officer that he had held in India. Clarissa, on the other hand, who when she was young used to plan the abolition of private property with Sally Seton, has presently become ignorant of social affairs and the condition of the middle and working classes:

“No, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? But she loved her roses--” (Woolf 45)

The figure of Lady Bradshaw stands in complete contrast to that of the old nurse. While the photographs underline the working class status of the nurse and present her as barely a consumer of photographs, Lady Bradshaw's habit of taking photographs affirms her membership in the higher echelons of society and confers upon her the very status of the photographer:

“Her ladyship waited with the rugs about her knees an hour or more, leaning back , thinking sometimes of the patient , sometimes , excusably , of the wall of gold... interests she had , however , in plenty ; child welfare ; the after-care of the epileptic , and photography , so that if there was a church building , or a church decaying , she bribed the sexton, got the key and took photographs , which were scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals , while she waited ..” (Woolf 36)

One of the many reasons, according to Bourdieu, that inspire an individual to engage himself in photographic activity, is:

“It provides the satisfactions of prestige, in the form of technical prowess or evidence of a personal achievement or of ostentatious expenditure.” (Bourdieu 24)

Lady Bradshaw's interest in photography provides a validation to her higher social status since it works as a testimony to her refined cultural taste, which the members of the upper classes are almost obligated to cultivate. However being a photographer does not constitute an essential part of her identity, it is just one of her many interests like child welfare and the after-care of the epileptic. The primary foundation of her social position is the fact that she is the wife of the eminent physician Dr. William Bradshaw to whose professional world she does not have access and neither does she try to gain one. According to Sontag, “Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention” (Sontag 15). While Sontag refers to the photographer's non-intervention in the events photographed, in case of Lady Bradshaw the phenomenon of ‘non-intervention’ is associated with her not trying to enter the professional world of her husband and that of the photographers. The photographs taken by her can be barely differentiated from those taken by professional photographers. Yet she is not a professional photographer herself. No mention is found of exhibitions held of her photographs. Moreover, the spheres of activity of Dr. Bradshaw and those of Lady Bradshaw are distinctly different and instead

of trying to intervene in the activities of her husband, Lady Bradshaw patiently waits in the car, sometimes for more than an hour, as her husband visits his patients. The photographer performs the role of a passive observer of events, not attempting to intervene and influence their spontaneous outcome and only waits for the opportune moment to click the trigger. Similarly, Lady Bradshaw, dictated by the conventions of a patriarchal society, limits herself within the role of a social hostess and does not attempt to go beyond the boundary of domesticity. She is occasionally allowed the luxury of indulging in interests like photography, but only under the implicit condition that she would not intervene in the masculine world of professional photographers or in the professional sphere of her husband. The violation of this condition would be considered as a transgression of her predefined social role and as an act of subversion against the dominant mode of patriarchy.

Lady Bradshaw conforms to her restricted social role not only when she is behind the camera, but also when she is the object of the photograph. When Lucrezia Warren Smith speaks to Sir William Bradshaw, vehemently trying to find a solution for the alleged insanity of her husband, Septimus is seen calmly sitting, "in the arm-chair under the skylight staring at a photograph of Lady Bradshaw in Court dress" (Woolf 73). That Dr. Bradshaw keeps a photograph of his wife in his chamber exemplifies a social symptom of the early twentieth century. Nancy Armstrong points out that:

"The respectable classes compulsively photographed themselves, their property, their progeny, and the milestones of their personal lives." (Armstrong 107)

The photographs were generally intended to "advertise a social and financial status" (Barthes 12) which is the avowed objective of Dr. Bradshaw as well of making available for public viewing Lady Bradshaw's photograph. All those who visit his chamber have unhindered access to the photograph, like Septimus. Since the photograph is intended for public display and to bear signature of the respectable class position of the Bradshaws, it is made to uphold their social status all the more rigorously. The Court dress of Lady Bradshaw in the photograph acts as a marker of rigid social hierarchy and declares a privileged social status. Although the photograph itself is displayed in a public space, yet it shows Lady Bradshaw securely housed indoors, underlining her restricted participation in the public world which is characteristic of her privileged class position, because only the working class women are believed to be engaged in an unrestrained interaction with the public realm.

Septimus, the poet-prophet, sees through the essential deception of the photograph's stringent attempt at social conformity. In the photograph the Court dress worn by Lady Bradshaw becomes a point of irony because it creates the illusion that Lady Bradshaw occupies a position of power by participating in the masculine professional world. But in reality, Lady Bradshaw inhabits the limits of domesticity and plays a subservient role to her renowned husband. The photograph fashions an identity for her, which is limited within the frames of the photograph but if the identity is taken beyond the scope of the photograph, it would immediately come into contradiction with the existing patriarchal conventions. Thus the image of Lady Bradshaw that the photograph

projects, is essentially a lie, which weakens the foundation of the social hierarchy that the photograph intends to publicise. It becomes apparent before Septimus that the social existence of Dr. Bradshaw, the great worshipper of 'proportions', is curiously riddled with inconsistencies. But Dr. Bradshaw, not being endowed with the prophetic vision of Septimus and driven by "his infallible instinct" and his "sense of proportion" (Woolf 70), is unable to discern these incongruities in his own life and sets out to enforce 'proportion' on the empire:

"Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion." (Woolf 70)

The overriding urge to impose 'proportion' on everyone disables Dr. Bradshaw to recognise the subjectivity of the individuals and he mistakes the subjective vision of Septimus as a violation of 'proportion'. Therefore, Dr. Bradshaw concludes that the contamination embodied in Septimus should be immediately segregated from the mainstream of society to prevent it from turning into a widespread contagion which could dismantle the equilibrium of society. Therefore he orders to remove Septimus to a 'home' (Woolf 68). But Septimus, who is able to see the intrinsic flaw in Dr. Bradshaw's vision, condemns the decision with utter disdain.

Although Septimus dwells in a peripheral social position, yet with the help of his great sensitivity, he is able to perceive the innate superfluity of the system of social hierarchy. The figure of Richard Dalloway stands in contrast to that of Septimus in this respect because, despite being a Conservative MP and thus occupying a position of power, Richard considers the markers of class distinction as insurmountable boundaries and regulates his social position according to the conventional norms of social hierarchy. He reveres Lady Bruton for her high social standing and supports her active participation in socio-political issues. He immediately responds to her invitation to help her write a letter to the *Times* promoting emigration to Canada.

The portrait of General Sir Talbot Moore in the alcove of Lady Bruton's drawing room is a towering presence which constantly reminds the onlooker of Lady Bruton's descent from military and civic ancestors and her constant engagements with the matters of the state. The photograph subtly underlines the difference of Lady Bruton from other women of the privileged class who lead a reduced existence as shadows of their husbands. The presence of the photograph is instrumental when Richard formulates a social image of Lady Bruton. According to Barthes, "what founds the nature of Photography is the pose" (Barthes 78). The pose in the portrait of General Sir Talbot Moore is symbolic of the pivotal roles he had played to influence the course of political events which had a direct connection with the nation's history. The photograph is a reminder that the General "had written there (one evening in the eighties) in Lady Bruton's presence, with her cognisance, perhaps advice, a telegram ordering the British troops to advance upon an historical occasion" (Woolf 74). The formulation of the social image and identity of the

General largely depends on in what pose the photograph captures him (Armstrong 81). According to Bourdieu:

“Photographs ordinarily show people face on, in the centre of the picture, face on, standing up at a respectful distance, motionless and in a dignified attitude...Striking a pose means respecting oneself and demanding respect.” (Bourdieu 90)

Since the photograph does not capture General Sir Talbot Moore in a familial role of a father or a brother, but in his official role of a General, which is also a position of power, it automatically commands reverence from the onlooker. The reverence does not remain limited to the object of the portrait itself but extends to the descendants of Talbot Moore and assigns an elevated social position to Lady Bruton as well. Under the aura of the photograph Richard finds it difficult to conceive of Lady Bruton as detached from her public activities and becomes aware of the stark contrast between her and Clarissa.

To the Lighthouse

Among the novels written by Woolf in the 1920s, it is perhaps in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf enters the most active interaction with photography. As the entry in her diary suggests, she intended to draw a portrait of her mother, Julia Stephen (1846-1895), in Mrs. Ramsay.

It was, for Woolf, an act of coming to terms with long suppressed feelings for her mother. Woolf confronted the obsession with her dead mother while sketching the character of Mrs. Ramsay and gave expression to her intimate emotions in the novel. While writing the novel, Woolf went through the photographs of her mother, taken by her great-aunt Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) and the visual encounters conferred a specific photographic quality upon the novel. It is interesting to note that, while writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf was simultaneously compiling these photographs which were published by the Hogarth Press in 1926 under the title, *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women*. In this photograph book, Woolf was tracing the biography of Julia Stephen in a narrative of photographs and in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf was revisiting her mother through a photographic narrative. According to Bourdieu,

“...the need for photographs and the need to take photographs (the internalization of the social function of this practice) are felt all the more intensely the more integrated the group and the more the group is captured at a moment of its highest integration.” (Bourdieu 29)

Just like a photograph, the first part of the novel, ‘The Window’, captures the Ramsay household ‘at a moment of its highest integration’ with both the parents, all the Ramsay children and guests like Paul Rayley, Minta Doyle, William Bankes and Lily Briscoe (fashioned after the author herself). But the subsequent sections make the reader aware that time has indeed passed and ‘The Window’, like a family photograph, is an avenue to revisit the past.

Photographic qualities are discerned in the psychological make-up of the six-year old James Ramsay as well. When Mrs. Ramsay talks of the favourable conditions of visiting the lighthouse the next day, James is overwhelmed in ecstasy as he finds himself standing on the verge of seeing one of his long awaited wishes almost being fulfilled:

“Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator as his mother spoke with heavenly bliss.” (Woolf 45)

James transfixes the moment of joy in his mind just like the camera captures the moment of joy within the frames. But the photograph does not assure the continuity of the moment of bliss. Rather it acts as a reminder of the ephemerality of the moment of happiness that was once a reality but is currently just a memory. Similarly, the moment of joy, cherished by James is brought to an abrupt end when Mr. Ramsay announces that the trip to the lighthouse would probably be impossible due to bad weather.

According to André Bazin:

“No one believes any longer in the ontological identity of model and image, but all are agreed that the image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death.” (Bazin 10)

Woolf's possible intention behind revisiting the image of Julia Stephen in *To the Lighthouse* in the guise of Mrs. Ramsay was to prevent the memories of her mother from being lost. Thus the novel serves a purpose similar to that of photographs, as it doubles up as a repository of memories.

Conclusion

Photographs in Woolf's novels perform a wide range of functions. In certain instances they act as a map to the interior world of the characters, in other cases they act as objects of class distinction and reflect other social realities. It is difficult to consolidate the various utilisations of photographs in Woolf's fiction in a linear statement.

Woolf attempted to liberate literature from the stringent dictates of realism. She emphasized the utter superfluity of the process of capturing every small detail of life, as is characteristic of realism, because in this process the essence of human life always remains beyond comprehension. Woolf, driven by her Modernist aesthetic, transfixes certain moments of the ‘incessant shower of innumerable atoms’ of life (Woolf 224). These moments appear as fragments and explore the interiorities of human life. The human eye often in its attempt to grasp all the details available in a visual field fails to focus on

several crucial components. The eye of the camera, as it freezes a moment for eternity, makes the crucial details available to the viewer. Michael North states that:

“The role of photography, therefore, is to restore to consciousness all that is filtered out” (North 54)

Woolf's fiction fixes a moment in time and in that slice of narrative draws the focus on unusual details of life. This characteristic renders Woolf's writing quintessentially photographic.

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