

1-1-1991

Disfigured Figures: Virginia Woolf's Disabled List

David Galef
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Galef, David (1991) "Disfigured Figures: Virginia Woolf's Disabled List," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 9 , Article 13.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol9/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in English, New Series* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

**DISFIGURED FIGURES:
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S DISABLED LIST**

David Galef

University of Mississippi

Virginia Woolf's miniatures—those briefly described figures that do so much to anchor the world in her novels—are both myriad and vivid. Like Joyce's peripatetic minor characters out on a Dublin afternoon, they seem to represent adamant pieces of reality in an otherwise malleable fictional structure. As moving images, they may persist in the reader's mind long after the major figures have faded. Given her range, from prime ministers to beggarwomen, one particular type stands out curiously: the figure of the cripple, the amputee, or the disabled. Often dispensed with in the space between parentheses, they nonetheless represent salient portraits of disfigured lives, part of Woolf's historical realism that points to the ravages of the Great War. In a larger sense, they also function as metaphors of disability in gender and society, and together form the contour of Woolf's ontological landscape.

One of the more prominent examples of the type is Captain Barfoot from *Jacob's Room*, the novel into which Woolf has crammed so much of *species mundi*. As Barfoot prepares to visit Ellen Flanders, the narrator notes: "He dressed himself very neatly in blue serge, took his rubber-shod stick—for he was lame and wanted two fingers on the left hand, having served his country—and set out from the house with the flagstaff precisely at four o'clock in the afternoon."¹ In a characteristic aposiopesis, Woolf has set down a few particulars that mark the captain as a war victim. Here is no Septimus Smith, incapacitated by his memories of death and destruction. Rather, the reader encounters an incidental note, much like an incident of war, damaging to those involved but somewhat incomprehensible to those on the outside, hence glossed over.

There are, of course, parallels. In *The Years*, when Colonel Pargiter embraces Mira, "He drew her to him; he kissed her on the nape of the neck; and then the hand that had lost two fingers began to fumble rather lower down where the neck joins the shoulders" (p. 9). As in the description of Captain Barfoot, the detail is noted in passing, as if it didn't matter—and yet, ghoulishly, it does. Captain Barfoot is merely sprucing himself up to see a woman, whereas the Colonel is using his mutilated hand for a sexual probe. Woolf has constructed a deliberately awkward metaphor for the conjunction of love and war, devoid of romance. In neither case has there been a cessation of life; instead, something has been irreparably damaged, irretrievably lost. The part

136 DISFIGURED FIGURES: VIRGINIA WOOLF

comes across as distanced from the owner—"the left hand" and "the hand that had lost two fingers"—suggesting a subtle disenfranchisement. The phantom synecdoche—a missing part representing a once-whole man—is reflected on the larger scale of one man for many, or a whole generation lost in wartime.

As Aileen Pippett pointed out over thirty years ago, *Jacob's Room* is a war novel.² It might be clearer to characterize it as an anti-war novel, and *The Years* also participates in this implicit attack. As it happens, the description of Colonel Pargiter is in the section labeled 1880, and Barfoot's visit occurs around 1900. Given the dating, Barfoot was probably involved in the Boer War, the Colonel in the Crimean conflict. The two men, then, embody a criticism of militarism in general, though in Woolf such references always reflect the losses incurred from 1914 to 1918, as well as the grievous aftermath. Woolf's attack is not waged on the battlefields, but rather within individuals, and with a sharp sense of irony instead of outright mourning. In his 1917 poem "Does it Matter?," Siegfried Sassoon employs exactly this tone and scope with killing accuracy:

Does it matter?—losing your legs?...
 For people will always be kind,
 And you need not show that you mind
 When the others come in after hunting
 To gobble their muffins and eggs.³

Sassoon goes on to remark, "There's such splendid work for the blind," and the poem ends on a note of equally false comfort. This is an irony that borders on scorn. Similarly, in her description of Mr. Pepper's incapacitating rheumatism in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf sums up: "One does not die of it, at any rate" (p. 8). In fact, the number of characters in Woolf with withered arms, limbs, and swollen veins is legion, enough to constitute a grand metaphor of disability.

Woolf's scorn for the crippling circumstances of war tends to belittle the victims, as well, provided they are members of the patriarchy. Barfoot, for instance, is not crippled but "lame," with a left hand that "wanted two fingers." The sense is of an injury somehow softened or lessened, like his stick shod in rubber. The demeaning comparison is with Topaz the cat, described a few pages previously, who has been gelded as a means of housebreaking him (pp. 22-23). In the same way, Mira calls her lover Uncle Bogy and puts the Colonel's glasses on her eczematous dog Lulu (*Years* p. 7). This is low burlesque, the men parallel to suffering animals. Mitchell Leaska, equating Abel

Pargiter with Leslie Stephen, suggests that Woolf is getting back at her father, but the expansion inherent in representational characters applies to a group of men as well as an individual.⁴

Castration symbolism is equally evident. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Hugh Whitbred thinks of how “that great shaggy dog of Clarissa’s got caught in a trap and had its paw half torn off,” an image linked to the next paragraph, where her husband “got on his hind legs” (p. 113). In *To the Lighthouse*, a far crueler scene is enacted in brackets: “[Macalister’s boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of his side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea]” (p. 268). The scene with the fish is all the more brutal for its piecemeal sacrifice. Leaska (p. 144) suggests that it represents the conflict between James and his father, and while the Oedipal struggle is certainly a theme, this scene seems more indicative of man’s general inhumanity to man, with a Woolfian emphasis on men. The judgment on all this comes in *The Waves*: “They pick at a worm—that is a hooded cobra—and leave it with a festering brown scar to be mauled by lions. This is our world...” (p. 23).

The Oedipal struggle *per se* or sublimated in war is hardly the only incapacitating force in society, however. It is well to remember that Captain Barfoot’s wife, Ellen, is confined to a bath-chair. Unable to participate in any of the festivities at Scarborough, she is wheeled about by an attendant named Mr. Dickens. Her injury remains undiagnosed, but she is described as “civilization’s prisoner” (p. 25). Woolf emphasizes through the thoughts of Mr. Dickens that she is a victim of male society: “He, a man, was in charge of Mrs. Barfoot, a woman” (p. 26). And though Mrs. Barfoot knows quite well where her husband is headed in the afternoons, she is powerless to act.

The woman-in-the-bath-chair image occurs elsewhere, with the same general import. In *Between the Acts*, part of the audience for the pageant is “the great lady in the bath-chair,” who years ago married a local peer. Unable to move, she has become indigent to the region, her “ungloved, twisted hands” resembling the brambles and briars of the underbrush (pp. 93-94). Perhaps the most prominent woman invalid, however, is the figure of Elizabeth Barrett in *Flush*. As Flush grows up in the Barrett household, he observes that his mistress “sometimes kept the house for weeks at a time, and when she left it, it was only for an hour or two, to drive to a shop in a carriage, or to be wheeled to Regent’s Park in a bath-chair” (p. 44). It is damning, if humorous, that the dog Flush enjoys a freedom greater than his owner. Flush, of course, is no mere animal image but an actual dog; still, as a feat of

138 DISFIGURED FIGURES: VIRGINIA WOOLF

anthropomorphism, he shares some of the brutish, wounded traits of Woolf's males.⁵

Evelyn Whitbred in *Mrs. Dalloway* is another in the range of Woolf's invalid women. As Avrom Fleishman has pointed out, the novel is infected by a whole host of illnesses, including Ellie Henderson's chills and Clarissa's prematurely white hair from influenza.⁶ The vaguely neurasthenic symptoms may not sound that serious, but, as Mrs. Hilbery in *Night and Day* remarks about her sister-in-law, who may lose the sight in one eye: "I always feel that our physical ailments are so apt to turn into mental ailments" (p. 488). Given this connection, one may extend the range of disability in women from the frustrated feminist Julia Hedge in *Jacob's Room* to the embittered Miss Killman in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Unlike masculine brutality, however, being female causes disability that is more unfortunate than reproachable. The only male character allowed such unmediated sympathy is Septimus Smith, a major character treated as if her were minor. Unsurprisingly, his thoughts often resemble Woolf's mental configuration.

One could stop here: the disfigured and the lame in Woolf's fiction are, in part, comments on social injustice. But Woolf was never quite content to remain within the confines of merely human systems. As she remarks in *A Room of One's Own* (pp. 114-115), reality "would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun." In other words, Woolf is more than a social observer; she is really a phenomenologist, observing the caprices of life, in general. The point is that in Woolf these occurrences so often happen on a minute scale, though nonetheless poignant, as in the "failure and awkwardness" in "The Death of the Moth" (*CE* 1: 360). Woolf's world is not pretty but real, in which a cat "bit a man's hand to pieces" (*Voyage* p. 132), "in which poor Mr. Curnow had lost an eye" in a gunpowder explosion (*Jacob's Room* 10), where the man putting up a circus poster has had his left arm "cut off in a reaping machine two years ago" (*Lighthouse* p. 21). As Betty Flanders thinks in *Jacob's Room*, "Accidents are awful things" (p. 7), and this general anxiety over the flux of the world is a common condition in Woolf's work. Or, as Woolf has Septimus Smith worry in *Mrs. Dalloway*: "The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" (p. 22)

This sense of unease tends to link manmade and natural catastrophe. Noting the gales and the roaring sea, Woolf notes: "The nights now are full of wind and destruction" (*Lighthouse* p. 193). In the same section, of course, Woolf records the deaths of Prue Ramsay in childbirth, and

Andrew Ramsay in a shell-explosion in France (pp. 199, 201). These are the unaccountable injuries, the unwarranted deaths. They are as close as Woolf comes to acknowledging something akin to fate. Later in the novel, James Ramsay ponders the way these events happen:

Suppose then that as a child sitting helpless in a perambulator, or on some one's knee, he had seen a waggon crush ignorantly and innocently, some one's foot? Suppose he had seen the foot first, in the grass, smooth and whole; then the wheel; and the same foot, purple, crushed? But the wheel was innocent. So now, when his father came striding down the passage knocking them up early in the morning to go to the Lighthouse down it came over his foot, over Cam's foot, over anybody's foot. One sat and watched it. (p. 275)

It is this premonition of sudden tragedy that Woolf describes as "a blade, a scimitar, smiting through the leaves and flowers even of that happy world and making it shrivel and fall" (p. 276).⁷ For Woolf, the postlapsarian tragedy is just as much an aesthetic loss as a moral one: disaster ruins the pattern of art.

If, as Jane Novak and others have noted, the pull in Woolf's novels is the struggle to shape the tumult of the world through art,⁸ there must nonetheless remain aspects outside one's ken. As Jinny reflects in *The Waves*:

And that man is a judge; and that man is a millionaire; and that man, with the eyeglass, shot his governess through the heart with an arrow when he was ten years old. Afterwards he rode through deserts with dispatches, took part in revolutions and now collects material for a history of his mother's family, long settled in Norfolk. That little man with a blue chin has a right hand that is withered. But why? We do not know. (p. 175)

One can at least distinguish between two different situations here: the man with the eyeglass has followed the path of war, from the shooting of his governess to his dispatch-riding. His retirement into history fits the mold of so many eminent men that Woolf has observed. There is some implied censure in his getting off scot-free, and this may be the fault of society. As for the little man with the withered hand, however, there is no perceptible reason, nowhere to affix blame. In an art that attempts to recreate life, epistemology has its limits.

140 DISFIGURED FIGURES: VIRGINIA WOOLF

The gamut of figures in Woolf runs from insects to adult *homo sapiens*, with the comparisons among them not always in favor of man, or even of humans. At times, the outlook seems pessimistic. Maria DiBattista goes further, noting "a pure negativity" at the center of Woolf's mature fiction.⁹ Overriding the despondent tone, however, is Woolf's perpetual curiosity in seeking out as much and as varied life as possible. As she writes near the end of "An Unwritten Novel": "Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner...you, you, you. I listen, I follow" (*Complete Shorter Fiction* p. 121). In an unfair society within a random universe, Woolf remains faithful to her art by virtue of her mimesis, by reproducing as many different types of life as she can, and by not trying to explain away the inexplicable.

NOTES

¹*Jacob's Room* (New York, 1978), pp. 24-25. All subsequent references to Woolf's novels and essays are from the HBJ editions, unless otherwise noted, with *CE* as the abbreviation for the four-volume *Collected Essays*.

²See *The Moth and the Star: A Biography of Virginia Woolf* (Boston, 1955), p. 158.

³*The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London, 1983), p. 91. For a larger perspective on the situation, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory* (New York, 1975).

⁴See *The Novels of Virginia Woolf from Beginning to End* (New York, 1977), p. 228.

⁵For a discussion of animal imagery in Woolf, see Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley, 1970), pp. 52ff.

⁶See *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, 1975), p. 75.

⁷Cf. Rachel's fevered vision in *The Voyage Out*: "But she only saw an old woman slicing a man's head off with a knife. 'There it falls!' she murmured" (413-14). Here, however, castration symbolism provides an added etiology to the fall.

⁸See Novak, *The Razor Edge of Balance: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (Coral Gables, 1975), p. 1.

⁹*Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven, 1980), p. 10.