Moments of Being Study Guide

Moments of Being by Virginia Woolf

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Moments of Being consists of a collection of several previously unpublished writings by the renowned, and often controversial, British novelist, Virginia Woolf. Written at various periods of her life and with various personal intentions, the writings essentially explore Woolf's relationship with her past - specifically, her belief that the past can, and should, be a source of personal and creative truth.

The book begins with an extensive introduction by the editor, who presents and develops the thesis that Virginia Woolf's memories of her childhood, and eventually of her adult life, provided substantial material not only for the many novels she wrote but also for her extensive, ongoing self-examination and analysis. The editor also discusses the points in Woolf's life and career at which the various writings were undertaken, commenting on the relationship between level of professional achievement, quality of writing and purpose for writing.

The first section is titled "Reminiscences," and according to the editor was written when Woolf was in her twenties and just beginning her writing career. The editor suggests that Woolf had two main reasons for writing "Reminiscences"— to practice digging into her past for personal and ultimately human truths and to practice using words to shape and define those truths. The content of "Reminiscences" consists almost exclusively of Woolf's recollections of her childhood, particularly her intense, idealized views of her mother, who died when Woolf was barely into her teens and whose presence in Woolf's mind is ongoing and almost inescapable.

The second section is titled "A Sketch of the Past." In an introduction, the editor points out that while it was written late in Woolf's career (when she was an established and well-known writer), its content is essentially that of "Reminiscences"—the product of Woolf's intense and ongoing focus on recalling and understanding her childhood. The idealized portraits of family and friends that characterized "Reminiscences" are tempered in "A Sketch..." with a more realistic perspective. Woolf's mother in particular is less idealized and much more of a multi-faceted, flawed human being. There is also an additional layer of context here; while the present in which Virginia Woolf is living and writing plays almost no role in "Reminiscences," in "A Sketch..." it's very apparent that Woolf is living at a very uncomfortable time when World War II is raging.

The third section of the book is headed "The Memoir Club Contributions,", and contains writings intended for a very particular audience - a group of intellectual, liberal and broad-minded family and friends that seemed, as a group, to be interested in exploring and defining new ways of being and living. The writing here reflects this shift in narrative purpose. Where the writing of both "Reminiscences" and "A Sketch..." is relatively free flowing, almost experimental, the writing of "The Memoir Club Contributions" is much more shaped and purposeful. Three essays make up "The...Contributions.". The first, "22 Hyde Park Gate," is yet another consideration of Woolf's childhood. The second,"Old Bloomsbury," is a celebration of the immensely liberating experience lived by Woolf when she finally moved out of her childhood home and into a more relaxed,

freer environment. In the third, "Am I a Snob?" Woolf emphasizes, for the first and only time in the book, her experience of her present life, as opposed to her experience, and understanding, of her past.

Editor's Note/Introduction

Editor's Note/Introduction Summary and Analysis

Moments of Being is a collection of unpublished works by Virginia Woolf writings. Although in unfinished form, the works contain value to researchers and devotees of Woolf. The editorial process undertaken to put this work together includes which of Woolf's revisions to include, and how best to remain true to her idiosyncratic styles of both word and punctuation usage.

"Reminiscences" were written early in Virginia Woolf's career and contain evidence of her experimentation with various forms and content. "A Sketch of the Past" was written late in Virginia's career, evidencing experience, maturity and success. Both "Reminiscences" and "A Sketch of the Past" were explorations of Woolf's childhood. Each provided valuable insight into Woolf's artistic, creative process during two different periods of Woolf's career.

Woolf drew upon the relationship between past and present to explore the relationship between incident and meaning. She believed that an individual's identity was ever-changing and developed that belief in her fiction, exploring the way past, present, and future contributed to an individual's self in both her life and work. Several similarities between incidents/characters recorded in these memoirs and incidents/characters are provided, suggesting that Virginia Woolf's translation of her past into her present work isn't necessarily literal. Moments of revelation and discovery, incidents, relationships all become transmuted as opposed to literally transcribed in Woolf's effort to explore what is a second key belief. This is defined as the belief that experiences in the world of the superficial, such as sensation and emotion, were merely conduits into the world of "reality," sudden, transcendent, intuitive understandings that there is, in fact, something greater and deeper going on in existence. Writing fiction was, for Woolf, a way of both connecting to and revealing not only that "something greater and deeper," and of connecting to and understanding the way moments/incidents/relationships in Woolf's own life led her to that something. When Woolf wrote about the experience, it began to seem real. In reading her memoirs, experiencing Woolf's life through her written words, the experience of reading her work is deepened.

Moments of Being can be analyzed in a straight-forward manner as a collection of writing, including consideration of the usual literary devices — word choice, metaphor and imagery, thematic meaning. The work also can be analyzed as unpublished writing by a well-known, critically-controversial, frequently-published author, including consideration of how said writings compare with other works.

A third level of analysis, provided by the editor of Moments of Being, is considerations of the writing as keys to insightful understanding of the relationship between incidents in Virginia Woolf's life and in her writing. However, in spite of the editor's tight focus on the life and work of Virginia Woolf, the relationship between the two defined by the editor

here is far from unique. Artists of any discipline all draw from life to create their work. Moments of Being can therefore be analyzed in yet another manner; as a treatise on the creation of art in general, an illumination of how a creative soul draws upon what has been lived in order to create a work exploring what might be felt and believed.

Moments of Being can also be analyzed not solely as a book about art, but also as a statement of philosophy; specifically, Virginia Woolf's philosophy that emotionally resonant incidents are in fact much more than mere events. They are keyholes through which a larger, more vivid life beyond the door of the physical and intellectual can be glimpsed. Moments of being are experiences through which the world of the spirit becomes accessible to the senses of the body. A primary question of this analysis might therefore be this: What new awareness of the nature of spirit is brought to Virginia Woolf's attention by the individual "moments of being" recounted by her in these memoirs?

Reminiscences, Chapter 1

Reminiscences, Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

"Reminiscences" was written early in Virginia Woolf's writing career, when she was deliberately setting herself a series of exercises and tests in order to develop her writing skills. One of these was to describe her childhood. Woolf's feelings for her sister Vanessa were among the most significant in her life. The complex web of relationships of the people that inhabited the home where most of "Reminiscences" is set is examined.

Woolf writes about the memories for her nephew, Julian, Vanessa's oldest child. Recollections of Vanessa by Woolf include her beauty, generosity and sensitivity, her practicality, her direct honesty, her artistic talent, and her determination to be a successful painter. These recollections lead into detailed recollections of Virginia and Vanessa's mother, Julia, who, Woolf writes, had married, borne three children (including Stella, who became Virginia's surrogate mother when Julia died), and experienced widowhood all by the time she was twenty-four. This intensity of lived experience, Woolf contends, was the foundation for the deep, strong, influential character Julia displayed while Woolf and her siblings were growing up.

Woolf describes the volatile relationship between Julia and her second husband and the equally volatile relationship with Julia, her husband, and their children. Julia died at a relatively young age when the children were quite young, and Woolf admits her recollections may not be accurate. She writes with consistent admiration and gratitude about Julia, describing her beauty, her universal and unconditional generosity, and her unquestioning support of her husband's work. She also was too controlling, and didn't believe that anyone could do things as well as she.

Julia died at age forty-eight when Vanessa was fifteen and Virginia twelve. Her mother's death is described as "the greatest disaster that could happen", but she notes that there are moments in which she remembers her mother clearly and intently.

The writing throughout "Reminiscences" is somewhat raw and unshaped, almost stream of consciousness in tonal quality. In the context of the book as a whole, there is a vivid contrast between this work and the more polished writing of "The Memoir Club Contributions" could not be more vivid. There she is clearly writing as much for effect as for truth. Here, it seems, truth is by far the more important consideration, but only to a point. There is the sense that Woolf is still writing from a place of idealized loss; flawed but more lingering saint than fallen idol.

In looking at spiritual truth glimpsed as the result of intense physical reality, there are several possibilities to consider. Did Virginia consider the experiences lived by her mother as some kind of archetypal spiritual expression of the experience of being a woman? Virginia undoubtedly experienced Julia's death as traumatic; was it, too, an

archetypal experience, the first time she became aware of the end of life awaiting all humanity? Or did she experience it as something less physical, the death of idealized love and safety and joy? In writing these memories for her nephew, did Virginia experience the creation of these memoirs as a "moment of being" in and of itself? In creating a time-transcending connection with the next generation, is she in fact embodying the spiritual tenet that universal truths continue forever?

Reminiscences, Chapters 2, 3 and 4

Reminiscences, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Woolf writes of the grief-filled period after Julia's death. Stella, Julia's oldest daughter, became devoted to caring for Julia's husband, Leslie. Woolf contends that Julia expected as much from Stella as she expected from herself, but didn't see how Stella was a generally happier person. This made Stella desperate to please. Woolf suggests that Stella's guilt at being away from home when Julia died was one reason why Stella became so devoted to Leslie in his grief, and why she took on all Julia's maternal responsibilities.

Gloom filled the Stephen home in the aftermath of Julia's death, and Stella became paler and thinner, always careful of Leslie. Stella finally accepted the proposal of marriage from Jack Hills, and became by degrees happier and healthier. Stella took a chill on her honeymoon, became progressively more ill, and in spite of rallying when she returned with Jack to England, succumbed to her illness and died. "Even now," Virginia writes, "it seems incredible."

In the aftermath of Stella's death, Vanessa took over many of the responsibilities, being more capable than Stella and Julia. She exhibited no real tolerance of Leslie's shifting moods, but instead met his emotional volatility with head-on reason. Jack Hills took comfort from being with Vanessa. Woolf, Vanessa, and their two brothers, Thoby and Adrian, blamed Leslie for the deaths of both Julia and Stella. Their two half brothers, George and Gerald made efforts to help them get over their grief. Woolf describes George as childish and insensitive in his eager determination to befriend them and who was somewhat deluded about himself and his own worth. The family took a week's vacation that turned out miserable, primarily due to Jack's inability to see how the family was striving to heal itself. The editor notes that Vanessa began an affair with Jack Hills.

There is a vivid contrast between the world of gloomy grief experienced by the family in the aftermath of Julia's death and the world of life and possibility opened to Stella by the appearance of Jack Hills. The book's two key levels of function as a piece of writing and as a manifestation of Virginia Woolf's philosophy of existence combine here more effectively than they do anywhere else. Stella, in Virginia's memory and words, experiences a spiritual lightness and freedom that, had she been stuck in the world of grieving physical loss, she never would have known.

In Woolf's references to her half-brother George, she provides foreshadowing to something she brings up later. At this point they're less about "moments" than they are about Virginia's technical efforts as a writer to create contrast—the saintliness of Stella becomes more vividly defined when juxtaposed with the hinted-at crassness of her brother George.

A Sketch of the Past, Part 1

A Sketch of the Past, Part 1 Summary and Analysis

"A Sketch of the Past" focuses on the same period in Virginia Woolf's life as that recalled in "Reminiscences"; however, "A Sketch of the Past" was written several years later, when Virginia is nearly sixty. "A Sketch of the Past" was culled from various of Woolf's writings and edited more extensively than "Reminiscences."

In April of 1939, Vanessa suggests that Virginia write her memoirs. Virginia begins with her first memory, a vividly colored pattern of flowers on her mother's dress. However, Woolf's "literary mind" made another memory—that of a drowsy, yet sensation-heightened morning at the Stephen family's vacation home. This, she suggests, is because the St. Ives memory is more in tune with her philosophy both as a writer and as a person in the sense that the sensory experiences of life are merely manifestations of a larger, more ephemeral and at the same time more spiritually profound truth at work in the world and in existence.

After exploring other memories (shame at looking at herself in a mirror, disgust at being touched sexually by her half-brother George) and their relationship with her present experience (her shame at anything resembling vanity and her ongoing feeling that there are parts of her body that shouldn't be touched), Virginia returns to her theory on existence. Day to day life is living in a kind of cotton wool, and transcendent experiences provide the kind of shock that re-awakens awareness of the profound truth of existence. Woolf comments that most artists probably see existence the same way.

Woolf analyzes the characters and places from her childhood, suggesting they remain so clearly defined in her present memory because they died when she was a child, and so they had no chance to change, evolve or age.

It is interesting to consider the sense of directness in "A Sketch of the Past" in relation to her writing in "Reminiscences", specifically, her writing about Stella. There she evokes her philosophy—here she explains it.

In Woolf's statements about her first memories, she says she'd prefer to make a new first memory because it makes more literary and personal sense. In other words, she's looking for effect rather than truth. This creation of memory could raise the question of what other memories she's re-written. Can a writer be absolutely frank and honest when s/he, like Virginia, is prepared to be flexible when it comes to the facts? Is there such a state as "absolute honesty" when it applies to a memoir? Memory is based upon what one observes and experiences; all people recount experiences differently, based on their own emotions, association with a similar situation in the past, etc. Can anyone be held to a standard of truth in writing a memoir that is humanely impossible to obtain?

A Sketch of the Past, Part 2

A Sketch of the Past, Part 2 Summary and Analysis

The reference to Woolf's mother in the preceding section seems to trigger a deeper consideration of her mother. Because her mother was continually surrounded by people, Woolf had been unable to form anything but an idealized impression of Julia's beauty, competence and generosity. Julia's exacting and demanding nature temper this image; even when Julia was dying, she corrected Virginia's posture.

Woolf comments on how difficult it is to come up with a realistic interpretation and/or understanding of a woman who died forty four years ago, adding that the only thing she can truly know is that her mother married two very different men, one proper, the other intellectual. Julia had been born in India, raised by a French governess, came of age in the intellectual/ artistic company of her mother's painter/writer friends and worshiped her Uncle Thoby, the husband of one of Julia's sisters. After turning down two proposals of marriage before she was eighteen, she fell in love with Herbert Duckworth, who she eagerly married.

Woolf's knowledge of Herbert Duckworth is secondhand from her mother's sisters, since Julia herself never talked about him. Julia lost her faith after Duckworth's death, becoming a curious combination of saint (for all her good and charitable works) and woman of the world (in her cynicism about religion and human intention). Drawn to his intellectualism, Julia married Leslie Stephen shortly after the death of Stephen's first wife.

It is possible that Virginia here has come to a more mature understanding of both her mother's character and her own perspectives than was apparent in "Reminiscences". The idealized, romanticized, ideally beautiful Julia presented in "Reminiscences" is now portrayed as beautiful, yes, but distant, preoccupied, and never fully connected to any of her children. It can be assumed that the span of an additional forty, intensely lived, spiritually-enlightened years is what brings such a difference in perspective. It is also possible that in those forty years, Virginia has come to an understanding of what Julia's life meant and how it related to the spiritual world — how Julia's life triggered "moments of being" in Virginia. Someone else's transcendent experience of spiritual truth can be passed on to another. This is perhaps Julia's true legacy to Virginia, not grief and loss so much as the potential for the deepened awareness grief and loss can engender.

A Sketch of the Past, Part 3

A Sketch of the Past, Part 3 Summary and Analysis

Virginia continues her recollections of life following her mother's death; how everybody in the family wore deepest black; how Stella struggled to console Leslie, and how everyone felt as though all the joy, all the light, all the laughter had gone out of the house. She recalls two moments of transcendent light and life that managed to pierce the gloom, one being the brightness and color of the windows at Paddington Station, and the other forming as an more intellectual transcendence—a moment of reading a poem to Vanessa and having a sudden, intuitive understanding of the poem's true meaning. Julia's death made Julia unreal, her children solemn, Stella something of a martyr. Somehow, Stella managed to bring a little light back into the family's life.

Virginia details Stella's physicality—pale, blue eyed, and fair haired, whereas her brothers, George and Gerald, were more florid, with dark eyes and dark hair. She also contrasts Stella's character to that of their mother, first in contrast with her mother; where Julia was assertive, Stella was passive; where Julia was intellectual, Stella didn't read; where Julia was really beautiful, Stella was gently attractive. She then describes Stella in contrast with her brothers; where George and Gerald were outgoing, boisterous and ambitious, Stella was reserved, calm and mostly content. Stella had been treated severely by Julia, but she did her best to give Virginia and her siblings a sense of normalcy. Several of Stella's suitors couldn't get past her sense of duty to the Stephen family.

Woolf's father's nephew, James (Jim) Stephen, briefly and intensely courted Stella in the days before Stella met Jack Hills. Stella had refused Jack Hills' first proposal — a refusal in those days was very damaging socially.

Jack Hills, despite the negative social stigma, came back to see Stella on the night before Julia died.

Virginia notes that she had accidentally thrown the previous writings out but has retrieved them and is determined to finish her reminiscences. After a brief reference to the war (World War II) being fought around her as she writes, Virginia turns her attention to Jack Hills, describing his parents (his jolly father, his repressed and repressive mother), his relationship with Julia (in which he treated her as a kind of surrogate mother), and his character — affectionate, honest, plain-spoken, hard-working, and "scrupulous." The pale and repressed Stella became a more colorful person, spiritually and physically, after becoming engaged to Jack, and Leslie became more and more tyrannical the closer it came to the date of Jack and Stella's marriage.

The present, in the form of the encroaching and noisy World War II makes its presence felt in Woolf's writing in a way it never did in "Reminiscences." There is the increasing sense that Virginia is escaping from a troubling present into an intriguing past, thus

adding an additional layer of meaning to the book's central thematic examination of the relationship between past and present.

This section has a sense of having been written as much for effect as for authenticity. There is the sense here that Virginia is functioning as a writer and not just a spiritually questing human being. Did she know that one day these memoirs would be read? Probably not, but there is nevertheless the sense that her craft as a writer was so ingrained that she couldn't help herself. There is at least the possibility that she is projecting insight onto moments that her novelist's mind has suggested would make good moments for insight.

A Sketch of the Past, Part 4

A Sketch of the Past, Part 4 Summary and Analysis

Virginia reminisces in detail about her brother Thoby (the second of four children and the oldest boy). She describes him as clever but not intellectual, emotional in his youth and restrained as a young man, shyly thoughtful, determined, resolute and underneath it all both devoted to and proud of his siblings.

Woolf provides a lengthy, detailed recollection of summers the Stephen family spent at St. Ives. Leslie was initially reluctant to spend money for a second home — Talland House, with its acres of gardens and proximity to the sea. Virginia describes the history of the town, its habits as a fishing village, and the family's habits as summertime citizens. The light and life of St. Ives is as vivid in Woolf's present as it was in her past. Shortly after Julia's death, Talland House was unexpectedly sold.

Virginia's strongest recollection of her older brother Thoby was when he suddenly became "a man" in the years after Stella's death. Woolf is reluctant to remember him in any further detail because of the anguish associated with doing so. Because so much that was important had happened to her, at that point in her life she believed that "the gods" had decided she was worth taking seriously, that she was living a kind of "extreme" reality, and that as a result she had a heightened sense of her own importance.

Woolf describes Thoby's straightforward reading and interpretations of Shakespeare, his potential for a long-lasting, notable career in law and died when he was twenty-six. After commenting briefly on the friends Thoby made while he was at school in Cambridge, Virginia's attention returns to Jack Hills. His anguish over Stella's death was based, at least in part, on sexual frustration, relief from which he found in an affair with Vanessa. George Duckworth, Stella's brother, asked Virginia to use her influence with Vanessa to put an end to it. Vanessa persuaded Virginia to be supportive and empathetic of her relationship with Jack.

Woolf analyzes the way her memory works and how she has realized that she habitually connects memory and experience with an external symbol. In the case of her life after the death of Stella, she connects it with a leafless tree growing in the garden at Hyde Park Gate. She also describes herself as thinking and remembering in scenes, "a means of summing up and making innumerable details visible in one complete picture."

Woolf contends that experiencing "moments of being" (such as those she had in the wake of the deaths of Julia and Stella) and developing an awareness of what those moments mean (such as that which she believes herself to have achieved) is in fact the fundamental purpose of existence and, perhaps more importantly, of art.

Virginia's reference to her own sense of self-importance is telling, in that nowhere here does she indicate that she has any sense of humor about this statement, or whether she believes it to be true. There is something almost messianic about the writing here, as though she believes she's been sent on a kind of mission to enlighten and awaken the world to the possibilities and truths beyond its sensory borders.

Virginia's comment on her tendency to write and think in "scenes" which, in spite of her protestations to the contrary, sustains and increases the sense that she tends, at this stage in her career, to write for effect. Some habits, such as writing with craft, can under such circumstances be hard to break. Another noteworthy point is her comment on having an awareness of symbols. The question naturally arises as to whether she's being disingenuous; does she truly believe herself to have been aware at that young age of symbolism and of projecting her emotional/spiritual experiences onto physical entities? Or, does she reinterpret her experience in the light of creating a "truth" more akin to who she has become.

A Sketch of the Past, Part 5

A Sketch of the Past, Part 5 Summary and Analysis

Woolf developed a close relationship with Vanessa when faced not only with George's distaste for Vanessa's relationship with Jack but with life in general in a community of men, including the volatile Leslie, the intellectually dull but opinionated George, the busy Gerald and Adrian, and the hard-working Thoby. She recalls the routine of breakfast at Hyde Park Gate, in which Vanessa and the boys rushed out of the house to their various occupations, leaving Virginia with her studying and Leslie upstairs in his attic. Leslie was a typical Victorian male — conservative and traditional. She and Vanessa were more Edwardian in their forward-looking outlook.

Virginia then recalls the Victorian social routine of politeness and adhering to the rules of superficial conversation, rules which she suggests informed the subtle, implication-filled manner in which she writes. George forced Woolf to participate in balls, dinners and social occasions, seeing social success as a sign of personal value. There was no connection between these two aspects of her life, between the social world she was bound to participate in and the inner life to which she felt much more connected.

Virginia sketches her scenes here with economy. Vanessa's stoicism contrasts powerfully with Leslie's volatility, while George's superficiality juxtaposes tellingly with Virginia's attraction toward it and solitude. The most telling contrast found in this section, however, isn't defined as overtly and, in fact, doesn't rest solely on the material in this section for its effectiveness. This is the relationship between the social world to which Virginia, through George, finds herself attracted and the spiritual world, glimpsed through "moments of being" she seeks throughout the book and hints at having experienced. Virginia is aware she is being distracted from what she herself has described as her god-given higher purpose, but is unwilling to do anything about it.

The Memoir Club Contributions, Part 1

The Memoir Club Contributions, Part 1 Summary and Analysis

The Memoir Club is a group of individuals, friends and colleagues in equal measure, to which Virginia belonged in the 1920s. The members of the Club set themselves and each other the goal of writing about their pasts with "absolute frankness," but the editor points out that both terms were, in Virginia's case, relative.

This memoir was written between the deaths of Stella Duckworth and Leslie Stephen. It begins with a colorful description of luncheon parties at Hyde Park Gate, wherein Virginia and Vanessa served as hostesses. Victorian traditions prevailed, and Leslie Stephen had a constant need to be the center of attention. George Duckworth saw these lunches as a way of advancing himself in society. George Duckworth is the focus of this memoir, with his attractive appearance, limited intellect, irrepressible spirit, deep well of extravagant feeling, and above all, his burning ambition to be a social success and to have Vanessa and Virginia successes as well. Vanessa eventually refused to behave in the way he thought she should, and George turns to Virginia then. She is placed in social situations that George considered appropriate. After describing several akward events, Woolf then describes coming home from one party, how she took off all her white satin dress, gloves and undergarments and lay down in bed where she was joined by George, who she calls her lover.

The writing in "The Memoir Club Contributions" is of a substantially different tonal quality than the other writings in the book. "A Sketch ..." and "Reminiscences" are definitely musing and reflective in nature, defined by an internal focus and by a more casual sense of language and narrative. "The ... Contributions," by vivid contrast, are definitely written for an audience and for a particular, demanding audience at that. There is an inescapable sense of craft and story telling here and throughout "The...Contributions," particularly evident here as Virginia saves a powerful, punchy, shocking image (that of an apparently sexual relationship between her and her half-brother) for her final words. It's definitely an ending, a written and shaped ending, as opposed to the closings of the other writings in the book; there, for the most part, words simply trail into silence. Another aspect of the craft associated with its ending is the way in which the image of incestuous sex, so potent to the contemporary reader, is made much more powerful because of the light, ironic, satirical tone of the writing that's gone before.

There is too much shape, too much craft, too much smoothness in this memoir for there to be a full and unconditional sense of frankness. Everything Virginia writes about may be true, and may have happened, but there is also the sense that her writer's eye and writer's skill with words has altered events just slightly, and perhaps even subconsciously, in order to make a good story. As there were many versions of the Memoir manuscripts, there is the sense that Virginia worked much harder to shape, point, and define the writing here for greater effect. They are, in short, externally

motivated works as opposed to "Reminiscences" and "A Sketch..." which are in both sense and intent more internally motivated.

What, if any, "moments of being" are described by this memoir? There is the sense that such moments, so accessibly described and defined in the other two sections of the book, are much less apparent here because Virginia's writing is more about effect than an actual examination of the experience she's describing. Nevertheless, it's possible to infer moments of being from the subjects of Virginia's memoirs. There is a symbolic value to the description of moment with George in bed; Virginia's evidently deliberate emphasis on the whiteness (virginity) of her clothes, and her careful description of how she removed all that white, suggests that in the moment of her being caressed by George, innocence was lost. She may have had a "moment of being" in which she realized that there was, even in the most well intentioned of gestures, the potential for darkness.

The Memoir Club Contributions, Part 2

The Memoir Club Contributions, Part 2 Summary and Analysis

Virginia begins this memoir by commenting that its perspective on "Old Bloomsbury" must begin by examining the perspective on life taken at Hyde Park Gate. She then picks up the narrative where she left off the last memoir, on the night after her social failure with George. She further defines the relationship hinted at in the previous memoir's final lines by suggesting that George, at least in his own mind, was "cuddling and kissing and otherwise embracing [her] in order . . . to comfort [her] for the fatal illness of [her] father, who was dying three or four storeys lower down of cancer". She then describes at length the physically and emotionally crowded life at Hyde Park Gate, with its multitude of family members making their home there, its constant stream of visitors, and decorating in deep reds and forbidding blacks. She defines a vivid contrast between that life and life at 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, where the constant stream of visitors continued but there was less family, the decorating was in a lighter, brighter taste than that of Hyde Park Gate, and there was above all a more active sense of life being lived.

This sense came not only from the active social life both she and Vanessa pursued, but also from the intellectual life brought into the house by Thoby when he returned from his studies at Cambridge, bringing his friends along. These friends included the artist Clive Bell (who eventually married Vanessa), the intellectual historian Lytton Strachey, the writer Leonard Woolf (who eventually married Virginia), and several others, who fascinated Virginia with their conversations and debates about ideas and concepts such as beauty, truth and meaning. She writes that their more society-oriented friends from the days at Hyde Park Gate, found the often-bedraggled physical appearance of these young men startling and off-putting, but adds that their appearance was part of what made them so attractive.

Virginia hurries over events in the years following Vanessa's marriage - the death of Thoby, Virginia's moving with Adrian into a new Bloomsbury home, and the increasing difficulty of maintaining intellectual conversations with Strachey and other members of the circle. She explains this difficult by suggesting that because Strachey and so many of the circle were homosexuals, none of the usual conversational relationships between men and women were comfortable. It is possible that this difference in sexual perspective was at least partly responsible for the rebirth of "Old Bloomsbury". A specifically sexual remark made by Strachey opened the doors to extensive, endless and obsessive discussions about sex—its mechanics as well as its philosophical, spiritual and/or emotional context. Her views of marriage, and relationships between men and women and morals all changed.

Woolf describes the influence and presence of Lady Ottoline Morrell, an aristocrat tired of the superficial social life of her circle. In search for meaning, she became involved in

the workings of Bloomsbury. The members of Bloomsbury were often welcomed into Lady Ottoline's home at the same time as were more conservative figures such as Winston Churchill. This, she adds, made life very "exciting" for her and contributed to the increasingly open, experimental and free life she was living. Bloomsbury "was a heartless immoral cynical society, it was said; we were abandoned women and our friends were the most worthless of young men." She concludes this memoir, however, with the comment that in spite of what was said and the apparent dissolution of what was done, something about Old Bloomsbury still survives.

This memoir is notable first for the way in which Virginia develops the metaphoric description of 22 Hyde Park Gate. For the full meaning of the metaphor to become apparent, it must be recalled that in earlier writings in this book, Virginia commented that after her mother's death, her father (Leslie) lived in the upper stories of the house. The metaphor developed here, therefore, functions on several levels. First, the stucco (a newer form of exterior decoration) of the lower level of the house parallels the fact that the younger generations lived there while the older generation (Leslie) lived upstairs, in the part of the house constructed of the more old-fashioned brick. Second, she describes the house as "rickety," a term that might also apply to the spiritual/emotional state of the family in the years following the deaths of both Julia and Stella. Third, when she makes the point that at the time of the encounter with George, Virginia was upstairs and her father down, she's suggesting that at that point in her life she was as emotionally and spiritually isolated as Leslie had once been, that she too was bricked up. She also might be suggesting that Leslie's ultimately fatal illness was, almost literally, bringing him down to earth — to reality. Finally, the oppressive darkness of the house's decoration is quite vividly juxtaposed with the airy brightness of Bloomsbury, a juxtaposition that defines the way that for Virginia, moving from Hyde Park Gate to Bloomsbury was arguably the greatest "moment of being" in her life.

Life in Old Bloomsbury was, for Virginia, a manifestation and embodiment of the kind of existence free from the "cotton wool" of the day to day that stifles humanity. In Bloomsbury, she became able to think, to feel, to laugh, to debate, to reach into the world beyond the physical, explore it and ultimately grasp it. Meanwhile, her narrative of Ottoline Morrell suggests that the appeal of that world beyond was (is?) not confined to those with the intellectual capacity to debate its existence and/or its value. Ottoline Morrell, an unlikely seeker of truth, had been drawn to Old Bloomsbury, perhaps because Old Bloomsbury's ways were simply something new and daring, something shocking, something to attract attention . On the other hand, it's possible to see in this section an echo of the near-messianic writing of Section 4 of "A Sketch ...." the sense that Virginia, and presumably other members of Old Bloomsbury, were, on some level, setting out to "convert" Ottoline and others like her to their way of thinking and/or of being.

In this memoir's final references to the survival of Old Bloomsbury, there are echoes of the epitaph of Christopher Wren, the architect of St. Paul's Cathedral. Wren's simple headstone's epitaph read "If you seek his monument, look around". The existence of the cathedral was proof enough of both his life and his greatness. The sense here, therefore, is that at least in Virginia's mind, the intellectual and spiritual and emotional

structure of Old Bloomsbury might be compared to that of a great cathedral — strongly built, lasting, a beacon of faith, a center of worship of the mind and of life and of spiritual transcendence.

The Memoir Club Contributions, Part 3

The Memoir Club Contributions, Part 3 Summary and Analysis

"Am I a Snob?" was written late in Woolf's career, at the height of her fame and at a stage when the somewhat-bohemian intellectual and emotional life of Bloomsbury had freed her from the stifling atmosphere of Hyde Park Gate. Virginia claims she hasn't experienced as much as the other members of the Memoir Club and is therefore being driven to focus on herself rather than on memory. Then, after describing herself as uninteresting, she chooses a single aspect of herself to examine—the question as to whether she's a snob. She describes a snob as "a flutter-brained, hare-brained creature so little satisfied with his or her own standing that in order to consolidate it he or she is always flourishing a title or an honor in other people's faces so that they may believe, and help him to believe what he does not really believe - that he or she is somehow a person of importance." By this definition, Virginia says, she is a snob and offers both memories of her snobbery-inducing childhood and her pride at receiving impressively letter-headed correspondence as proof.

Virginia then recalls instances in which she acted upon her snobbery, her desire to be associated with important, titled people. In particular, she details her relationship with a popular, mercurial, titled hostess named Sibyl Colefax, a relationship in which they in fact exploited each other's snobbery.

Of all the writings collected in this book, "Am I a Snob?" comes across as the most uncomfortably self-conscious. The writing seems constricted and perhaps even pinched; there is no sense of playfulness, as there is in the other "...Contributions," nor is there a sense of free flow and eager experimentation found in "A Sketch..." and "Reminiscences." Here the tone of the piece is such that she seems to be taking herself to task for not only living in the world of "cotton wool," but enjoying it. As she seems to pity Sibyl Colefax for living that life and for staying so attached to it, by likening Sibyl's snobbery to her own, she also seems to be pitying herself for staying just as attached to that life herself.

So what might be the "moment of being" glimpsed here, the connection to the spiritual life/world beyond this? In finding a parallel between her and Sibyl's life, Virginia seems to be experiencing the truth that deep down, human beings no matter how enlightened or not, share fundamental characteristics, in this case, the desire to be associated with greatness. Virginia is ultimately human. Herein lies the ultimate paradox inherent in her unique belief system—awareness of the spiritual can, for the most part, only be awakened through "moments of being" experienced in the physical world of birth, relationship, need, and ultimately death.

Characters

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf was a British novelist, living and working in the early-to-mid 1900's. She was the author of several well known, at times experimental, novels, including Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, The Waves, and Orlando (see "Objects/Places"). She is almost as famous for the manner of both her life and her death as she is for her writing. She was born into an upper-middle class family in the latter years of the conservative Victorian period of English history and came of age both physically and intellectually in the more liberated Edwardian period. During this time, she became involved with a group of intellectuals, artists and writers who gathered frequently and regularly in Virginia's home and produced innovative works of creativity, research and philosophy. This group became known as "The Bloomsbury Group," named after the borough of London in which they lived (see "Important People - Bloomsbury" and "The Memoir Club"). The group was regarded by many in the artistic community and in the public as large as bohemian, almost to the point of promoting immorality.

Virginia Woolf had a turbulent life. Her mother died when she was thirteen; the step-sister who took over raising the family died only two years later, and her favorite brother died of typhoid when she was twenty-four. She was hospitalized at least twice for mental illness, had several lesbian affairs, was both vilified and highly praised in critical circles for her work, and eventually committed suicide in 1942, after having tried at least once before. She has since been the subject of extensive scholarship and commentary, with not only her novels but almost every piece of writing she ever produced, (letters, diaries, journals, memoirs) published, examined and critiqued.

The Editor

The editor of this book, Jeanne Shulkind, essentially provides commentary on the previously-unpublished writings she has put into this collection, and explains what they mean in terms of Virginia's life and how they relate to Virginia's work. The Editor also illuminates the process by which she took Virginia's original texts, sorted out what was intended in her revision process and created a final cohesive whole. Her function is important because without the observations she makes, there would be little or no sense of why these writings are important to consider in the context of Virginia Woolf's writing as a whole. She points out, in her introduction, the various ways in which the incidents recalled in the various memoirs are transfigured and/or reshaped in Virginia Woolf's novels. A reader who has looked into those novels might be able to see the connections for him/her self - for readers who haven't, the editor's commentary here is insightful and adds an additional layer of interest to the writing at hand. It must be noted that the text of Moments of Being contains no indications of what, exactly, the editor's credentials are for making these observations and/or comments.

Julia Stephen

Julia was Virginia's mother and is portrayed by Virginia as strong willed, intelligent and exhaustively busy. Her first marriage was to Herbert Duckworth, by whom she had three children (George, Stella and Gerald). Her second was to Leslie Stephen, and with him she had Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian. For Virginia's commentary on her mother's marriages see "A Sketch of the Past, Part 2 Summary and Analysis." The writings in this collection indicate that Julia, in both life and death, had a profound influence on Virginia's life and work. In her introduction, the editor suggests that Julia's influence, both in life and in death, was the most important factor in Virginia becoming who she was as both a person and a writer.

Leslie Stephen

Leslie was Virginia's father. He is portrayed by her as being highly intellectual before Julia's death, and highly emotional afterwards. The implication of Virginia's writing is that he loved Julia deeply, was unable to express it fully when she was alive and became profoundly remorseful when she died. His remorse, according to Virginia, became the dominating element of his personality, making him very difficult for everyone in the family to deal with for the rest of his life.

Vanessa (Stephen) Bell

Vanessa is Virginia's sister, older by three years. She was Virginia's close friend, ally and confidante throughout their lives. Vanessa attempted to take over the raising of the family when both their mother Julia and their half-sister Stella died. A painter, Vanessa was as experimental as Virginia both when it came to creating art and when it came to exploring sexuality and relationships. Vanessa and her husband Clive, a fellow painter, were also members of the Bloomsbury Group. She is portrayed by Virginia in these memoirs as scrupulously honest, incapable of hypocrisy, strong willed and naturally wise.

Thoby Stephen

Thoby was Virginia's older brother, the second of the four Stephen children. He is portrayed by Virginia as intellectual, enthusiastic and protective of both his sisters. Virginia's writings indicate he died young; an editor's footnote indicates that he died in his mid-twenties.

Adrian Stephen

Adrian is the youngest of the four Stephen children, and in these memoirs receives the least attention of them. He is described as having been Julia's favorite and as being a

member of the Bloomsbury Group, but his character is neither developed nor described in as much detail as that of Vanessa, or even Thoby.

Stella Duckworth and Jack Hills

Stella was Virginia's half sister, Julia's second child from her first marriage to Herbert Duckworth. After Julia's death when Virginia was thirteen, Stella "assumed her responsibilities in the house at Hyde Park Gate." She married a man named Jack Hills, an uneducated, ambitious businessman, two years later, but died three months after the wedding. This left Vanessa to fulfill the responsibilities that Stella had assumed after the death of Julia. This was "a role which ill suited her [Vanessa]". Vanessa's discomfort in her new role perhaps contributed to her affair with Hills.

George and Gerald Duckworth

Julia's two sons by her first marriage—George was the older, Gerald the younger, and Stella the middle child. Virginia describes Gerald as the more intellectual and George the more emotional and childlike of the two brothers. George figures more prominently in the memoirs, particularly in Virginia's reminiscences about the intensity and frequency of his efforts to involve Virginia and her sister Vanessa more thoroughly in "society." On more than one occasion, Virginia's writing implies that George initiated sexually-incestuous relationships with both her and Vanessa.

The Memoir Club

This group of writers/friends/colleagues was formed in 1920, in the aftermath of World War I, and had at its core a few of the more dominant members of "Old Bloomsbury" (see below). They met to socialize, intellectualize and share writings with each other, with the stated goal of "absolute frankness"—a goal which was successfully reached only to a point, as each of its members (according to Virginia's husband Leonard) interpreted "absolute" in relative terms.

Old Bloomsbury

This is the original name for the collection of writers and/or intellectuals that over the course of time became "The Memoir Club." Virginia and her husband, Leonard, along with Vanessa and her husband, Quentin Bell, were core members of the group, which also included noted novelist E.M. Forster (A Room with a View) and historian Lytton Strachey.

Objects/Places

London

England's capital city, and the city in which Virginia Woolf and her family lived all their lives.

Kensington Gardens

A large park in the heart of Central London, through which Virginia and her family walked regularly and often. It can perhaps be seen as symbolizing the influence of nature and freedom in their young lives, and as such, its presence in Virginia's narratives of her childhood can perhaps be seen as foreshadowing of the intellectual freedom and more "natural" lifestyle of her Bloomsbury-centered adulthood.

22 Hyde Park Gate

Virginia's childhood home in London. It's described as being small, crowded, dark and uncomfortably laid out and can be seen as symbolizing the emotional and intellectual darkness that Virginia experienced after her mother's death. She makes a vividly defined effort to paint a clear contrast between the stifling atmosphere here and the much lighter, freer atmosphere of her adult home in Bloomsbury (see below, "46 Gordon Square").

St. Ives

This is the small seaside fishing community where the Stephen family spent summer vacations. Virginia describes it in quite idealized terms, recalling both the house where they stayed and the town itself in vivid detail.

Talland House

This is the house in St. Ives where Virginia and her family stayed. Like the town itself, the house is portrayed as a bright refuge from the physical gloom of the house at Hyde Park Gate. It's interesting to note that shortly after Julia's death, Leslie sells Talland House and the family's summer visits end. This is perhaps connected to Leslie's at times self-indulgent, self-torment. There is the sense that after Julia's death, Leslie became absorbed in his dark, stifling grief and self-recrimination, with the result that he perhaps felt as though he belonged in the dark and stifling environment at Hyde Park Gate more than he belonged in the light and freedom of Talland House.

The Leafless Tree

Virginia comments in "A Sketch ... Part 4" that the leafless, barren tree growing in front of the house at Hyde Park Gate came to symbolize for her the emotionally barren life there following Julia's death. In her introduction, the editor suggests that this experience of seeing inanimate objects as symbols of an internal emotional state was characteristic of Virginia as a writer and Virginia as a human being.

46 Gordon Square (Bloomsbury)

After Leslie's death, Virginia and her siblings moved into a new home in Bloomsbury, 46 Gordon Square. In "The...Contributions - Old Bloomsbury", she goes into extensive detail about the differences between the two homes. Hyde Park Gate was dark, small, crowded but silent, full of death and emotion. Gordon Square, she says, was full of light, large, was home to less than half the people, noisy with nearby traffic and street sounds, full of life and ideas. It was at Gordon Square, it seems, that Virginia began to come into her own, as a woman and as a writer.

The Stain on Vanessa's Dress

In "The ... Contributions - Old Bloomsbury", Virginia describes a confrontation between Lytton Strachey (critic and historian, homosexual, member of Old Bloomsbury) and Vanessa, in which he openly and directly asked whether a stain on her dress was semen. This, Virginia suggests, brought down all the barriers, between the members of the Old Bloomsbury community, to sexual conversation and/or activity, with the result that they all, almost without exception, took a deeper, freer interest in their own sexuality, that of others and that of society as a whole. It's possible to see this incident as the trigger for the development of Old Bloomsbury's reputation, referred to by Virginia later in this same memoir, of being an immoral community.

Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, The Waves

In her introduction, the editor references these three novels written by Virginia as particularly noteworthy examples of the way in which she transmuted incidents and/or experiences from her life into her literary art. Mrs. Dalloway, the editor suggests, is full of references to a socialite friend of Virginia's mother; The Waves contains many references to Virginia's siblings and to developments in her own philosophy of being and existence; To the Lighthouse is, according to the editor, in many ways a portrait of Virginia's parents, Julia and Leslie Stephen.

Argyll House

Another of the many important houses or homes that appear in these memoirs, Argyll House plays a prominent role in the book's final essay, "Am I a Snob?" The home of Lady Sibyl Colefax, Argyll House is the richly-decorated setting for several parties at which Virginia realizes her hunger for social success does in fact make her a snob. It's also the setting for a final conversation between Virginia and her now-widowed friend, Sibyl, in which Sibyl reveals herself to be just as much of a snob as Virginia is afraid she is, which, according to Virginia's definition of "snob" (see Am I a Snob? - Summary and Analysis) makes her a smaller, needier human being than her social status (and Virginia's perception of her social status) might suggest.

Themes

The Relationship between Past and Present

This is the dominant theme of the book, playing out on several levels. On perhaps the most fundamental one, it is the reason for the book's existence. Virginia Woolf's interest in, and examinations of, this relationship are the reasons she wrote what she did in these memoirs and in the way she did. Secondly, the observations Virginia makes about the relationship between past and present appear throughout these writings, which, as the editor notes in her introduction, were created at very different times in Virginia's personal and creative life. This makes these observations of the relationship, and her comments on them, the unifying (thematic) thread tying these observations together. On another level, her analysis of the relationship seems, at least in the writings here, to lead her to make conclusions about not only who and why she is who she is, but why she does what she does in the way that she does it, and why she wants to do it in the first place. In other words, in these writings she creates a synthesis of past experiences combined with present perspective to create an understanding of personal truth.

Finally, it's interesting to note that on several occasions throughout the book, writings about the past are contrasted with framing commentary, albeit brief, on present circumstances. This is particularly true of the writings in "A Sketch of the Past," in which several references are made to their being written while World War II is raging. Virginia seems, on these occasions, to be making a determined effort to escape from her present into her past, and when one takes into account the fact that Virginia committed suicide shortly after these pieces were written, this apparent attempt to take refuge in memory becomes even more poignant.

There is, however, a potential contradiction here. In "A Sketch of the Past," p. 98 (see "Quotes"), Virginia suggests that the true meaning of the past, particularly a turbulent past such as her own, can only be discerned in tranquility, specifically, a present tranquility. The implication here is that if the present is in turmoil (the larger present life as well as the smaller, more immediate present in which the artist stills him/herself in preparation for the act of creation), the meaning of the past cannot be disinterred and transmuted into art. The question, therefore, is how does this perspective fit with her previously-observed effort/intent to reconnect with the past in a present filled with turmoil? Ultimately, the relationship between past and present seems to be ambiguous, inescapable, but important and affecting at different times for different reasons.

Moments of Being

"Moments of being" are, in the implications of Virginia Woolf's writing and in the outright statements of the editor's introduction, the ultimate source of truth in memory, in present experience and in art. They are defined, Virginia suggests, as moments of existence in which a shock (of emotion, of insight, of sensual experience) triggers an awareness of a

larger truth beyond that of day-to-day function. Moments of being are a spiritual truth as opposed to the mere physical truth of what one sees, hears, touches or tastes. This, according to the editor, was a cornerstone of Virginia's philosophy of both art and life; she believed that insight into meaning and truth was, and is, only fully available in the experience of such "shocks," such moments of being. For the most part, then, these memoirs are Virginia's attempts to explore her memories of such moments in her own life, and to understand the truth that emerges from those memories. But because she is on some level practicing her craft as a writer, she is also exploring ways to use words and images to convey both the experience of the moment and the truth that emerged.

In "The...Contributions," Virginia adds another layer to her practice; she is, on some level, striving to entertain and/or impress her friends/colleagues, and to meet their challenge of absolute frankness. It could be argued that these externally-imposed objectives obscure, on some level, the truth she's attempting to explore and/or define, that she's manipulating truth in order to create a good story. It could also be argued, however, that in the existence, the style and the effectiveness of these particular essays, there is evidence that that craft, skill and technique are at the very least useful tools for bringing that truth to an audience, and thereby expanding their understanding of a truth, if not the truth.

Emotions and Feelings

Feeling and emotion are, in turn, the key components of "moments of being" that create the opportunity for insight into, and understanding of, truth. Love for her mother, fear of her father, grief at her mother's death, anger at her father's refusing to fully live, joy at the freedom of Bloomsbury are, for Virginia, triggers for understanding the deeper truth lying beyond and giving meaning to daily existence. It's important to note here that Virginia portrays the concealment and/or suppression of emotions as something of a sin, or at the very least as a great loss of potential in both individuals and humanity as a whole for living a fully-human life. There is any number of negative comments throughout these memoirs on her insistence upon, and other people's resistance to, living a life fully connected to honest human feeling. This connection, for Virginia, includes being open with feelings, the fullest possible expression in her mind of an experience of the truth that lies beyond who had what for breakfast, who's visiting who after tea, and who's wearing what at dinner.

And at this point, thematic considerations return full circle to the idea of the relationship between past and present. If, in the past, Virginia had never known emotional repression, she would never, in her present, have come to such a passionate determination of the value of emotional freedom. And if, in the present, Virginia had never gone searching for the emotional meaning behind the repressions of her past, she would never have become the writer and artist she grew into in her present.

Style

Perspective

When considering the narrative perspective of Moments of Being, there are two points of view to be taken into account—that of the editor and that of the Virginia Woolf, whose work the editor is exploring. In terms of the former, the book was clearly put together with the intent of deepening knowledge and/or awareness of Virginia Woolf (see "Quotes", p. 7), particularly the relationship between her work and her life and even more particularly, the relationship between her work and her past. That said, there is the clear sense that the book is intended for an audience who has at least some degree of that knowledge already. A reader without such a background would, in all likelihood, enjoy the writings collected here, but would not necessarily take the book in the spirit in which it seems to have been put together; a spirit, which, at least to some degree, is academic.

There is the very clear sense that the editor collected the pieces she did and has presented them in the way she has in order to offer and define a specific thesis—that ongoing excavation of her past played an indispensable role in defining Virginia Woolf's life and work. This thesis has, in turn, three components, each of which is both referred to by the editor and supported by the content of the writing's selected. The first is that for Virginia the writer, the past was a source of raw material to be mined for dramatic incident. The second is that for Virginia the philosopher, the past contained examples of the way intense "moments of being" illuminated the way to a deeper understanding of the nature and purpose of life. The third is that for Virginia the human being, the past offered at least partial explanations of why and how she became the person she did.

All three components of the editor's thesis form the basis of the second point of view at work in Moments of Being - that of Virginia herself. Throughout the writings collected here, she consistently writes from the perspective that her past is (was?) a place where personal truths began—the truth of individual identity as well as the truth of the larger meaning of existence. This consistency is apparent even though the writings in the first two sections ("Reminiscences" and "A Sketch...") were intended to be read only by Virginia herself ,and the writings in the third section ("The ... Contributions") were intended for more public consumption. Ultimately, the essential purpose of both sets of writing is the same, which is to explore and define the connection and relationship between who Virginia was and who she is. The implication throughout, of course, is that the relationship is not unique to her, as a person or as a writer, but is actually a fundamental aspect of human existence.

Tone

There are a number of different tones present in the book. The writings of the editor in her various introductions are by turns insightful, almost worshipful, and dryly academic

(particularly when it comes to describing the actual editing process). Virginia's writings, meanwhile, are a complex blend of several different tonal voices. Of these, the most dominant is an unsentimental reflectiveness, an almost clinical excavation of incident, feeling and impression. She is, it seems, looking for who she is and trying to understand how she came to be the way she is, all with the (apparent) aims of finding the best words to communicate both event and aftermath. At times, this sense of searching takes on almost a desperate tone. This is particularly true in "A Sketch...," in which the occasional references to the bombs and horror of World War II England create the sense that Virginia is, at least to some degree, looking to her past for refuge from a terrifying present. "The ... Contributions" take on yet another tonal quality. In these writings Virginia is not only serving herself through searching her past for both raw material and refuge but is also serving others, i.e., her critical audience of friends, lovers, family members and fellow artists/intellectuals, with its high standards for being both entertained and presented with truth. There is a sense of calculation about the Memoir Club writings that's missing from the other works; her purpose with the Club is to entertain, and she's self-conscious about it and is shaping her work with that purpose in mind. In other words, the search through the past in "Reminiscences" and "A Sketch ..." seems innocent, freer, more vulnerable. In "The ...Contributions," the search is as much for writer's effect as it is for writer's cause.

Structure

The first thing to note about the book's structure is that in terms of event, it's roughly chronological, exploring events in Virginia's early childhood ("Reminiscences"), teen years and young adulthood ("A Sketch...") and adult life ("The ...Contributions", particularly the last two entries). While there is a degree of overlapping (in all three sections Virginia's childhood is explored extensively), for the most part the chronological movement of incident is forward. On this level, the book's structure is almost traditionally autobiographical, making it relatively easy for the reader to come up with a sense of the physical journey of Virginia's life's. The second thing to note, however, is the time at which the various contributions were written. According to the editor, "Reminiscences" was written first when Virginia was in her twenties; "The ... Contributions" was written over a number of years when Virginia was at her intellectual and creative peak in her forties, and "A Sketch..." was written near the end of Virginia's life. This aspect of the book's structure suggests that at least on some level, Virginia was at her most mature as a person, as a philosopher and as a writer in her mid-adulthood; she is confident, secure and accomplished. The fact that "A Sketch ..." was written in her final years but is focused on her childhood suggests that as she aged, she became less confident in her present and returned to her search of the past for meaning in her life. On this level, the book's structure gives the sense that in terms of her spiritual journey, Virginia's life moved forward to a point, but then went backward. Finally, it's interesting to consider in this context the fact that within a year or two of "Reminiscences" being written, Virginia Woolf killed herself. The values of past and present, it seems, could no longer be healthily or safely reconciled.

Quotes

"Publication which would make readily available to a wide audience material that so richly illuminates the vision and sensibility of a writer whose contribution to the history of English literature was so profoundly individual could not but be a tribute honoring her memory." Editor's Note, p. 7

"The beliefs and values that underlie [Virginia Woolf's] work are shown in these pages to be an outgrowth of the sensibility which marked her responses to the world, from the very beginning, with a distinctive quality." Introduction, p. 11

"[Virginia Woolf] believed the individual identity to be always in flux, every moment changing its shape in response to the forces surrounding it ... the identity of the present moment ... is never static, never fixed like a fly in amber, but as subject to alteration as the consciousness that recalls it." Introduction, p. 12.

"The present moment is enriched by the past, but the past is also enriched by the present." Introduction, p.13-14

"During 'moments of being', [the] self is transcended and the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole." Introduction, p. 18.

"Other children had their stages, and sudden gifts and failings; [Vanessa] seemed to draw on steadily, as though with her eye on some far object, which attained, she might reveal herself." Reminiscences, p. 29.

"...the effect of death upon those that live is always strange, and often terrible in the havoc it makes with innocent desires." ibid, p. 32.

"[Julia] rose to the heights, wide-eyed and nobly free from all illusion or sentiment, her second love shining pure as starlight; the rosy mists of the first rapture dispelled forever. Indeed it is notable that she never spoke of her first love; and in treasuring it changed it perhaps to something far fairer than it could have been, had life allowed it to endure." ibid, p.33.

"[Julia] kept herself marvelously alive to all the changes that went on round her, as though she heard perpetually the ticking of a vast clock and could never forget that some day it would cease for all of us." ibid, p. 35.

"Written words of a person who is dead or still alive tend most unfortunately to drape themselves in smooth folds annulling all evidence of life." ibid, p. 36

"... who ... can distinguish the good from the bad, the feeling from the sentiment, the truth from the pose?" Reminiscences, Chapter 4, p. 58.

"I could spend hours trying to write that as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me. But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself." A Sketch of the Past, p. 65.

"... is it not possible ... that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them?" ibid, p. 67

"...as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off..." ibid, p 78

"The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths." ibid, p. 98

'Why should our lives have been so tortured and fretted? By two unnecessary blunders - the lash of a random unheeding flail that pointlessly and brutally killed the two people who should, normally and naturally, have made those years, not perhaps happy but normal and natural. Mother's death: Stella's death." Ibid, p. 117

"... why do [these scenes] survive undamaged year after year unless they are made of something comparatively permanent? Is this liability to scenes the origin of my writing impulse? Are other people also scene makers? These are questions to which I have no answer." Ibid, p. 122

"... while we could see the future, we were completely in the power of the past ..." Ibid, p. 126

"When I look back upon [Hyde Park Gate] it seems to me so crowded with scenes of family life, grotesque, comic and tragic; with the violent emotions of youth, revolt, despair, intoxicating happiness, immense boredom, with parties of the famous and the dull ... with love scenes ... with passionate affection for my father alternating with passionate hatred of him, all tingling and vibrating in an atmosphere of youthful bewilderment and curiosity ... I feel suffocated by the recollection." The Memoir Club Contributions, "Old Bloomsbury", p. 161.

"Who am I that should be asked to read a memoir? A mere scribbler; what's worse, a mere dabbler in dreams; one who is not fish, flesh, fowl or good red herring. My memoirs, which are always private, and at their best only about proposals of marriage, seductions by half-brothers, encounters with Ottoline and so on, must soon run dry." Am I a Snob?, 182

Topics for Discussion

Create a memoir of your own of some of your childhood experiences - a home where you grew up, a home (perhaps of your grandparents) you visited, of vacation spots. Search your memory not only for recollections of actions and events and places, but also for feelings associated with those actions, events, and places. Examine those recollections for connections with your present experience - what in your past has affected your present? How? Why?

Consider the quote from p. 12 relating to Woolf's consideration of the nature of identity. Do you agree or disagree? Are there aspects of identity that remain unchanged, or is identity constantly changing? What is the relationship between internal circumstances and/or external circumstances and the individual's sense of self?

Virginia Woolf and other members of Old Bloomsbury/The Memoir Club were comfortable members of the upper middle class, that is to say they didn't have to work terribly hard at making a living. Discuss whether intellectual/spiritual exploration, such as that undertaken by Virginia Woolf and other members of Old Bloomsbury/The Memoir Club, is a luxury enabled by upper-middle class money. Or is it, as they saw it, a necessity for the growth and/or movement of society towards improvement through the influence of the art (literary, visual) that emerges from such conversations and explorations?

Consider the quote from p.32 in terms of your own life. What is your experience of death? How did having that experience change you and those who shared that experience with you? In what ways do you feel you share common perspectives on death with society in general? In what ways do you feel your perspectives are different?

Discuss Virginia Woolf's philosophy of the nature of existence - specifically, her contention that "moments of being" (intense feeling/experience) are keys to unlock the door to larger, spiritual truths. Do you agree or disagree? What evidence from your own experience supports your argument?

Consider the quote from p 182. Debate the question of what forms the basis for affecting, engaging art - large events such as wars, disasters, grand love stories, or interpretations of/insights into the humanity of daily events? Factor in a definition of art, particularly literary art - its purposes, functions, goals, effect on the viewer/reader, etc.

The artistically-inclined members of "The Memoir Club" insisted upon absolute frankness. Discuss whether it's possible for such frankness to exist in art of any kind, not just writing. Consider that art is, almost without exception, filtered and shaped (albeit to varying degrees) by the artist's craft, talent and intent. Does frankness automatically equate with truth and honesty? Debate whether art is "distilled" truth, a "manipulation" of truth, a "manifestation" of truth, a "perversion" of truth. Is there a single answer that can be applied to art in general?

To what degree is memory truth? To what degree is meaning shaped by memory, and vice versa?