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Personal Identity and Particles: The Relativity of Time, Internal Fluidity, and Social Progress in *Orlando*

Riley Eyring
University of Portland, Eyring22@up.edu

Abstract

This essay examines the structural choices Virginia Woolf makes in *Orlando* to mirror her prose with the relative models of time the protagonist experiences throughout the story. Comparing the leading theories in particle physics at the time Woolf wrote to her work shows that she was aware of these developments and incorporated this knowledge into her writing. Specifically, the relativity of time is used to mirror the relative nature of Orlando's identity, as they change from man to woman throughout the course of the novel.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf; *Orlando*; Relativity; Time; Fluidity

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is a novel with a lot on its mind—tracking social, political, and internal developments in Orlando's life and society, spanning entire generations and epochs in observance of her semi-immortal protagonist. While it seems a project this ambitious is destined to come up short due to the massive scale, Woolf somehow succeeds through a clever device that is built into the structure of her writing and aids her message in the novel—namely the compression and elongation of time, stretching out or shrinking back in on itself as needed for this vast narrative structure to work. Through this manipulation of narrative pace she is better able to address the wide array of weighty thematic topics she wishes to explore. The main thematic thrusts of the novel include issues of interiority and identity within her protagonist, and more societal critiques of the periods of British history Orlando lives through. Weeks and years melt away into the background when Orlando's interiority is the main focus—when they are working on their piece “The Oak Tree,” or speeding through the Victorian era to the 1900s for example. Inversely, Woolf elongates and foregrounds the historical events when she wishes to make a larger societal critique in sections such as Orlando's ambassadorship and transformation in Constantinople and their run-ins with various famous writers in the Elizabethan era. Just as Orlando's identity and the recorded history Woolf presents are relative, so too is Woolf's use of time as a narrative device. In order to capture the multitudes inside her character, and the many shifting realities of their surrounding society, Woolf uses time as both a subjective and objective device within the narrative—two models of time that contradict each other, but also both contain truth.

There is fresh insight to be gained analyzing Woolf's use of time through a hard-science lens in order to get a better sense of the thematic content Woolf is exploring in this novel. This is a perfect example of the thematic content and structure of the novel aligning to enrich the messages Woolf is trying to drive home. There is a natural correlation between the relative way time is utilized to structure the novel and the topics Woolf explores, namely internal fluidity in identity and social progress, and how these two things, like time, contradict each other and coincide in equal measure. Upon researching the issue of time's relativity in Woolf's work, it was surprising to see that even physicists of the time had written on this issue. This is not a case of independent, parallel thinking—it is on record that “Woolf and Lawrence both read about the developments associated with the new physics, and both seem to have assimilated into their literary works certain ideas from their reading” (Crossland 8). This narrative device was not formed in the microcosm of working on the individual novel *Orlando*, but rather is a product of Woolf's other interests seeping into her prose work. This genuine interest in the sciences means the methods by which she writes *Orlando* are similar to those of a scientist experimenting—acknowledging at any given point the current truth of Orlando's interiority, but also leaving room for further discovery and multitudes of other simultaneous truths within the character. Woolf uses time in *Orlando* as “solid,” linear in the way we normally experience time, and “shifting,” where she elongates and compresses it to suit her narrative goals. Through a more scientific lens, physicist Louis de Broglie would classify this dual relationship of the “solid” and the “shifting” as the “particle” and the “wave.” They exist simultaneously, but are impossible to witness at the same time—a seemingly contradictory relationship. This recognition of fluidity was occurring within the scientific community during the same period in which Woolf wrote *Orlando*.

In 1927, a year before Woolf published *Orlando*, the principle of complementarity was proposed by Niels Bohr. This was an attempt to reconcile two apparently contradictory theories of how light works—particularly regarding light waves and light particles. Both definitively exist, but cannot be viewed at the same time, which puzzled scientists at the time who had not yet dealt with this kind of necessary contradiction. This set a scientific precedent for a similar observation Woolf

makes in a 1929 diary just two years later: “I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever: will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world—this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous” (Crossland 45). In this passage, Woolf engages with the concepts of duality and coexisting contradictory ideas in parallel fashion to Bohr’s principle of complementarity, which was established around the time she wrote *Orlando*—a novel very much about the contradictory nature and fluidity of identity and society. While the principle was formed to acknowledge multiple truths in wave-particle duality, Woolf takes a similar model and uses it to acknowledge and explore the multitudes inside her protagonist Orlando. She makes this literal through Orlando’s mystical change from a man to a woman to portray that in different spatial and internal contexts, humans evolve into very different people throughout their lives. We are fluid creatures and by playing with time as a device, Woolf adds a structural aspect to the novel to further drive this point home—Orlando and the society he/she inhabits are fluid, and so too is their conception of time that carries them along through life. This portrayal of Orlando in the novel is very similar to the principle of complementarity: “both waves and particles exist within all matter and radiation, just as both man and woman exist within Orlando, but only one incarnation can be seen at any particular moment” (Crossland 51).

The specific ways within the text that Woolf utilizes this conception of relativity and time show the extent to which this modern science was influencing her fiction. One of the richest examples of Woolf using time as a narrative device is Orlando’s tenure as ambassador in Constantinople; she first prolongs time to focus on a detailed satirical attack of British imperialism, and then rapidly speeds up during Orlando’s slumber and transformation into a woman commence. The satire begins with Orlando’s motivation for departing Britain for the embassy in the first place. Instead of having any noble intentions towards moral diplomacy, he is simply uncomfortable with the unwanted advances of Archduchess Harriet and makes arrangements to leave, securing a cushy position as ambassador in the British embassy. Woolf prolongs the timeline here to deliver a lengthy satirical critique of British Imperialism. Though Orlando is a progressive character in some ways—chiefly the fluidity of their identity and sex—their failure to turn a critical eye to their own imperialist tendencies is a major flaw. This is a flaw Woolf telegraphs from the beginning of the story, opening with Orlando attacking the disembodied Moor’s head, unaware of how insensitive this act is. Once Orlando arrives, Woolf gives the impression that there is very little substantive work being done at all: “Orlando was kept busy, what with his wax and seals, his various colored ribbons which had to be diversely attached, his engrossing of titles and making of flourishes round capital letters” (Woolf 122). Most of his concerns are aesthetic, a shallow performance of the actual task of diplomacy. Days drone on spent on petty concerns rather than true work. The promotion of Orlando to Dukedom by King Charles for their job performance is a sort of punchline for Woolf, capping off this protracting sequence of meaningless aesthetic chores with a prestigious promotion. The ensuing party thrown in celebration continues this priority of the embassy’s emphasis on aesthetic over functioning governance; General Brigg’s comically over-the-top firework display is an unnecessary show of power and dominance that leaves the native citizens of the cities unsettled and disturbed. This entire sequence is told in fragments of perspective, an example of Woolf applying complementarity to a kaleidoscope of perspectives instead of time in this instance. Because this is an event witnessed by many, sampling many perspectives to get at the many truths of the night is more effective for this scene than the more internal complementarity of time she uses later in the transformation scene.

The transition from this elongated satire to Orlando’s transformation scene shows just how often, jarringly so at first, Woolf manipulates time as a fictional device. After pages upon pages of

dry satire, elaborating greatly on small details such as ribbons and wax seals, suddenly Orlando falls into a slumber and an entire coup by the Turks occurs within a few sentences. The jarring change from elongated exterior objective time, to internal subjective time as Orlando slumbers and is transformed is an attempt to address multiple truths at once. Firstly, a satire of the ridiculousness of imperialism, and then an interior transformation—making literal the gender fluidity Orlando feels within themselves. Like wave-particle duality and the principle of complementarity “we must accept that both waves and particles are there at all times, but we must also acknowledge that only one can be seen, shown, or expressed at any one moment—the two are complementary *and* mutually exclusive” (Crossland 52). In this section, the seven-day slumber Orlando undergoes during the transformation drastically, though briefly accelerates the pace of the novel—the fluidity of time directly coinciding with the moment Orlando’s implied gender fluidity manifests physically. Woolf is breaking down temporal barriers at the same time barriers of identity are being broken in Orlando. In striking juxtaposition to the preceding, elongated section, The Young Turks overthrow the government and pillage the Constantinople embassy Orlando presides over in a matter of one sentence: “The Turks rose against the Sultan, set fire to the town, and put every foreigner they could find either to the sword or to the bastinado” (Woolf 133). This is a striking use of form as function—using what initially might be perceived as a narrative device to keep the pace of the story at a good clip to mirror the interiority of the protagonist. Whereas the party scene prior to Orlando’s slumber is prolonged and detailed—a satirical takedown of British imperialism in many aspects—the events of the outside world during the slumber itself, though very significant, are granted barely any time as the focus of Woolf’s pen turns back towards Orlando.

Time once again is used as a tool to help explore all of the truths of Orlando’s interiority in the Elizabethan section of the novel. This section is focused on the development of Orlando as a writer, and later on their run-ins with the great writers of this era. Development of “The Oak Tree” actually begins before the transformation—a piece of work that spans most of Orlando’s adult life, both as a man and later as a woman. It is representative of the multitudes within that Woolf is exploring. Each time Orlando returns to rework the piece their approach is different—beginning it as a young man with prose full of showy, masculine energy and concluding in a less sophomoric, blunt and beautiful fashion as an older woman. This poem is fundamental to the character as a creative reflection of their interior state throughout the novel, but also is a good of example of Woolf’s motivations for when she manipulates the timeline. The switch from the subjective time of Orlando retreating to nature to work on their writing, and the more external, objective sense of time when Orlando reenters society to commiserate with canonized figures is in this case a narrative necessity. Woolf puts aside time for Orlando to develop internally as the years rapidly accelerate in the outside world, then pulls them back into reality when she wishes to make a societal point on a new era.

Orlando’s first run in with a figure of the London literary sphere occurs before his ambassadorship, when he invites poet and critic Nick Greene to his palatial estate in hopes he will agree to read “The Oak Tree,” and give his thoughts. While Greene is not in the established literary canon Woolf questions, his opinion seems to mean a lot to Orlando. He is crushed when Green writes a thinly veiled satire of his person and his literary work with “no one could doubt that the young Lord who was roasted was Orlando; his most private sayings and doings, his enthusiasms and follies, down to the very color of his hair” (Woolf 95). After this scathing critique Orlando is somewhat humbled and retreats into nature and his mind. This period in which Orlando spends time in nature—reading, writing and attempting to improve—is another instance in which Woolf accelerates time. Orlando retreats inward to reflect and write as the years go by startlingly quickly.

Woolf interjects to explore time's subjectivity for Orlando in this state— "An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length" (Woolf 98). This is an acknowledgment that her device is rooted in complementarity; she is telling the reader she is aware of the jarring nature of the device she is utilizing to address as many interior and exterior truths as she wishes. She further elaborates "on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second (Woolf 98). For the first time she lays out the contradiction at the center of this device she has constructed the novel around—the competing models of subjective and objective time—plainly and clearly.

After the transformation and ambassadorship a newly female Orlando returns to Britain to an estate in shambles, and immerses herself in the vibrant literary sphere of London in the Elizabethan era. Part of Woolf's project with this novel is to re-contextualize the male-driven literary canon of the time— she felt that critics unfairly panned women writers for not capturing the "spirit of the age," while men were extended more courtesy and opportunities. With this in mind, Woolf takes the opportunity to make fun of some of these canonized authors, punching up humorously through the eyes of a now female Orlando navigating these circles. Woolf believed that in order to revise the canon to include a breadth of female writers we collectively need to "'rewrite history' by seeking out figures neglected by conventional (patriarchal) histories in order to trace a female tradition" (De Gay 62). Woolf never completed her history in non-fiction form, but *Orlando* is in many ways an attempt to complete this project in fiction, affording her more creative license than if she had adhered to strict fact. This is another point at which Woolf's use of time facilitates another topic she is interested in addressing—another elongated sequence in which Orlando participates in the surrounding world and Woolf slyly critiques it. Even after their traumatic run in with Nick Greene, Orlando is still fixated on the literary figures of the period—"Addison, Dryden, and Pope had chimed in her head like an incantation ever since" (Woolf 197). Woolf's manipulation of time is essential for this project; in order to cover this period of the literary canon, her protagonist needs to exist in many epochs in order to be the muse for Woolf's observations on each.

The introduction of Alexander Pope is at once respectful of his reputation as a generational wit, yet also pokes fun at him with glee. Woolf's goal here is not to deny Pope's talent, but to humanize him, showing a person who had flaws and struggles. The canon makes these old writers into "Great Men," often at the exclusion of other groups, and tends to look at their lives in a vacuum only considering their work. This is a shoddy process of deification that Woolf makes fun of in her portrayal of Pope. Woolf is not so much critiquing Pope himself, as the culture of literary critics and biographers that tend to glorify, even when a writer's flawed self tends to manifest obviously in their work. Woolf's piercingly honest observations of her version of Pope make these flaws clear. One that stands out in terms of humanizing the man is "we know as if we heard him how Mr. Pope's tongue flickered like a lizard's, how his eyes flashed, how his hand trembled, how he lived, how he lied, how he suffered" (Woolf 208). This is to show that great works of art do not come only from this patriarchal model, but rather the ineffable things that make us human—the interior elements of suffering and happiness that we all share. Woolf does not reject the opportunity for a few pot shots at Pope though. Orlando's "perspective is often used to cut them down to size: quite literally so, in the case of Pope, who is described as a 'little gentleman', and rendered silent" (De Gay 64). Part of the reason this entire sequence lands with impact is because of Woolf allowing a more objective sense of time to reign over Orlando's subjective perspective. Not only does this allow her satire and critique room to breathe, as she crafts a more accurate portrait of figures like Pope, but it also serves to make Orlando's subsequent acceleration through the Victorian age feel all the more jarring and surreal.

The Victorian section of the novel—in which Orlando addresses their grievances with new cultural trends and gives in to the spirit of the age to marry Shelmerdine—serves as a capstone of Woolf's interests in this novel. This is once again a section of perfect juxtaposition, beginning more objectively as Orlando laments the social trends of the Victorian age, though her marriage to Shelmerdine is in a way their succumbing to the “spirit of the age” Woolf is so very skeptical of. This section begins with a massive cloud hanging over Britain, the permanent shadow indicating Woolf's tepid attitude toward the onset of a more regressive and smothering era. The vibrant social scene Orlando engaged with in the Elizabethan era is smothered, while “The sexes drew further and further apart, no open conversation was tolerated. Evasions and concealments were sedulously practiced on both sides” (Woolf 229). It is in these conditions that Orlando's opus “The Oak Tree” is finally finished, centuries after Orlando began its writing. Orlando reflects on the piece, realizing that though they have undergone vast internal and physical change over their centuries-long lifespan, inside they are essentially the same person. Time has matured Orlando, but “through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons” (Woolf 237). It is only upon this realization that Orlando is able to finally finish the poem—a realization that all of their past selves still are within and that the “self” is fluid and ever-morphing. Woolf has spent much of the novel breaking down constructed barriers in favor of complementarity and fluidity—whether barrier of time, personal identity, or surrounding sociopolitical forces—and Orlando is only able to finish the poem when they realize this applies to their work as well. “The Oak Tree” is not meant to be a perfect snapshot of Orlando's final self, but a reflection of the multitudes of selves they carry within. As this creative spirit takes over Orlando, she is also possessed by the spirit of the age in unprecedented fashion as her ring finger begins to violently tremble, and Orlando decides they need to finally find a husband.

Orlando's courtship and engagement to Shelmerdine reads like a sly joke on Woolf's part—acknowledgement of how bizarre her use of time could seem to a reader more accustomed to classical literature techniques. It is also a subtle satire of the power of such a repressive age to make even the most unique individuals fall in line to a degree. This issue of marriage seems to persuade Orlando now more than ever as she writes, “But all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand; and then in one finger of that hand” (Woolf 239). When Orlando decides finally to find a husband, it proves a more difficult challenge than expected. It is only when they find another similarly androgynous man, whose interiority also exists in a state of complementarity, that Orlando finds a suitable partner in Shel. The way in which they meet is also notable. Accepting that she may be doomed to never marrying, Orlando wanders into nature for solace and breaks her ankle. Shel passes on a horse and helps her. At breakfast the next morning “they had guessed, as always happens between lovers, everything of any importance about each other in two seconds at the utmost” (Woolf 251). The quickness of this is fascinating. Though Orlando gives in to the spirit of the Victorian era by getting married, they are quite an atypical couple for the time and non-conforming in a key way. Both exist in a state of androgyny, their personal identities outside of the binary understanding of gender most people held at the time. They see through appearances and immediately recognize the fluid aspects of each other's identities with “‘You're a woman, Shell!’ she cried. ‘You're a man, Orlando!’ he cried” (Woolf 252). While society only recognizes them each as their biological sex, they see each other's true gender-fluid nature. The detail that the two fell for each other in approximately two seconds is very intentional, and a tip off that their romance is intrinsically tied to what Woolf is getting at through her use of time. Just as Woolf has broken down the barriers of time to tell this story, Shel and Orlando have broken down

the barriers of gender as a couple. This is another structural parallel to the content of the novel. Woolf is not content merely to explain this rejection of binaries—both of subjective/objective time and of gender— she shows it to the reader as well to further her points.

As the novel ends, Orlando's journey through time is complete. The last sentence is a bit on the nose with clock symbolism, reading "the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight" (Woolf 329). The scholar James O'Sullivan analyzes this use of the clock as symbol in this last passage. Sullivan also notices Woolf's dual conception of time in the book, elaborating that "Woolf's awareness of time as both an objective and subjective measure is made apparent through her use of the clock" (Sullivan 42). I agree with him on this, but strongly disagree with his conclusion that Woolf believes "subjective time transcends its objective counterpart" (Sullivan 42). There is much evidence within the text of Woolf exiting the subjective perspective of Orlando's interiority and using a more objective timeline to critique the society of a specific era. One does not surpass the other; rather they both manifest at different points and provide a fuller picture of Orlando's fluid identity and the identity of society. To claim one has more importance than the other is to dispute the whole point of the novel. Most everything in life—identity, social progress, even our own perceptions—is fluid. Accepting that we contain contradiction is imperative to living a fulfilling life. Woolf was trying to create a timeless story by using this structure. Modeling her use of time after Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity opens up the rest of book's thematic content to be read through this lens. In inviting and encouraging contradiction through this structural choice, Woolf makes her novel open to endless interpretation; each reader is able to project issues of their day onto the contents of the story. Multiple reads can be true, even if they contradict somewhat through this model—a fitting ambiguity for such a complex and evolving protagonist and story.

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