Crystal Mills
ENG 4375 C
Prof. D. Childs
December 15th, 2006

<u>Words and the World as Fiction: Deconstructing Woolf's</u>
<u>*The Lady in the Looking Glass*</u>

> The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized skepticism, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. (Johnson xiv)

The post-modernist Derridian assumption is that every text, whether a sign system

or literary work, undermines and contradicts the meaning it presents. However, though

Derrida extends flexibility and forgiveness to the author who may not recognize that "the

necessity with which what he *does* see is systematically related to what he does *not* see,"

(Johnson xv) other authors can be said to textually acknowledge the destabilized nature

of their own fictional worlds. In *The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*, Virginia

Woolf goes beyond contemporary modernism to write a significantly post-structuralist

short story, or, at the least, a story that encourages its own deconstruction. As the

unnamed, "unseen" (Woolf 87) narrator uses vague facts to launch grand imaginings

about his or her subject, Woolf calls into question the ability to ever truly know an

individual, to be able to fix a single signifier to a signified, and to find an ultimate truth

independent of sign systems, all before such terminology was available. Though *The

Lady in the Looking-Glass* contains what might be characterized by the post-modernist as

misguided modernist hope for a new master narrative, the conclusion reached is one

where logos is challenged and integrated into the text.

From the first page of *The Lady in the Looking Glass*, the existence of the

narrator, and thus the reality of the story itself is called into question. The narrator – ungendered but presumed to be female through her association with the author by a mutual interest in characterization and word choice – uses the formal term "one" rather than the personal "I" as is common for stream-of-consciousness narrative. The story attempts a proverbial, didactic tone, but the personality of the narrator comes through in emotional descriptions of Isabella Tyson and her drawing room, though not without the narrative being unsettled and de-centered with the consistent usage of "one". In addition to claiming to be "like one of those naturalists" who "mov[e] about freely, themselves unseen" (87), the narrator observes events, the movements of the room, "that never happen, so it seems, if someone is looking" (87). The construction of the story does not necessitate actual participation by the narrator but rather states that "one" might do so, and with these ambiguous phrases, Woolf reveals an interest not just in the subjectivity of perception through a first-person narrator, but the nature of truth and reality itself.

A clear dichotomy of movement is established between the world observed directly by the narrator, and that transmitted to her by way of the mirror: "Nothing stayed the same for two seconds altogether. But, outside, the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sunflowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. It was a strange contrast – all changing here, all stillness there." The flux of the drawing room conveyed through the "blowing," "falling," and "pirouetting" is that described by Henri Bergon's theory of language articulating, that is, fragmenting and immobilizing, the simultaneity and change of experience: "Our perceptions, sensations, emotions, and ideas occur...confused, ever-changing, and inexpressible because language cannot get hold of it without arresting its mobility"

(Bergson 129). The narrator arrests "the transient and the perishing" (88) by verbalizing its nature and holds the same, distinctly literary, goal for Isabella: "It was her profounder state of being that one wanted to catch and turn into words" (91). Paradoxically, in the narrator's attempt to assign signifiers to the signified of the room-in-flux, she fixes the experience she proposes "one" *would* have, were there not the mediating influence of a potentially non-existent narrator.

Critics including Dean R. Baldwin agree that the mirror represents the aesthetic sensibility: "The mirror, in other words, is art...Life is exactly this – alive – hence part of the world of flux and change that makes some kinds of knowledge difficult if not impossible. The world of art, by contrast, is fixed" (Baldwin 56). In this definition, extended to describe a contrast between the mirror as painting and the observed as writing, the "loss involved in the act of recording" (Briggs 176) is limited to the stillness of the mirror, and neglects the Bergsonian loss in the narrative enterprise itself. However, the function of art as a signifier is akin to that of written and spoken language in its delimitation of signifieds. The mirror becomes as a secondary narrator that stabilizes and immortalizes the world it reflects, which we know to be one of movement, to an even greater degree than the words of the primary narrator.

A similar binary to that between observed and reflected realities is found in the narrator's acknowledgement of a divide between reality itself and the imagined, figured using the metaphors of "ugly walls" and "elegant sprays of convolvulus" (88). The narrator voices her logocentric modernist desire for an ultimate truth outside the text Isabella resides in, her diction becoming increasingly violent and unsettling: "If she concealed so much and knew so much one must prize her open with the first tool that

came to hand – the imagination. One must fix one's mind upon her at that very moment. One must fasten her down there" (91). "The ascertaining of 'truth' and 'untruth,' the ascertaining of facts in general, is fundamentally different from creative positing" (Nietzsche 384) and the narrator seems to recognize this, almost desperately reassuring or convincing herself of her ability to grasp a truth through mental exercise: "There must be a truth; there must be a wall" (89).

In post-structuralist as well as pragmatist criticism, the assumption of a master narrative, of an immutable value to be discovered within reality is not foregone:

> Reality as such is not truth, and the mind as such not a mere mirror. Mind *engenders* truth *upon* reality...Hence arises the idea that our minds are not here simply to copy a reality that is already complete. They are here to complete it, to add to its importance by their own remodeling of it, to decant its contents over, so to speak, into a more significant shape. (James 133).

While the narrator searches for truth in imagination, being deprived of fact, she nonetheless projects onto reality her unique system of understanding and accommodation. When a packet of letters is dropped on the table, the image of the mirror becomes "unrecognizable and irrational and entirely out of focus" until the mind works on applying its synchronic system of signifieds to the new signifier: "And then by degrees some logical process set to work on them and began ordering and arranging them and bringing them into the fold of common experience" (90). The reader understands that the narrator's perception is influenced by her previously established beliefs about the truth of Isabella. She has imaginatively defined Isabella in such a way that the letters are conceived to be at the very least "a handful of casual letters" but potentially "tablets graven with eternal truth" (90), disregarding the third option of the letters being "all bills" (93).

A similar process occurs when the allegedly "real" Isabella enters the frame of the mirror fully: "One verified her by degrees – fitted the qualities one had discovered into this visible body" (93). As the narrator projects the systems familiar to her, there is again a sense reality distorted, of the description of Isabella being considerably changed by the way she is "fitted" with preconceived fancies. Additionally, Isabella is recognized as a sign within a textual system: "She came so gradually that she did not seem to derange the pattern in the glass, but only to bring in some new element which gently moved and altered the other objects as if asking them, courteously, to make room for her" (93). Because language systems are interconnected infinitely, each signifier held in place by its relation to every other, defined by being *not* every other, when Isabella enters the frame a new signified has been introduced and the system must realign. Terry Eagleton writes, "Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together," (Eagleton 128) and for this reason does the narrator have such trouble fixing Isabella. Every text fails to realize a stable meaning, and as a sign within a textual world, a meaning cannot be attached to Isabella.

The seemingly epiphanic moment at the end of the story has been a point of contention among critics. Many feel the change in tone to denote a return to reality reads as failed irony or comedy, a disappointing, "unconvincing" twist ending: "The insistence on the truth of the final reflection is internally reductive and violates the modal coherence, the unity of perspective and voice, which structures the narrative" (Barzilai 208). However, this final scene returns the reader to the question of how much of the

story can be known to be real, or real in the context of any fictional narrative. Initially, the reader was given the sense of being able to determine where the narrator possessed fact, and where she embarked into invention: "In each of these cabinets *were* many little drawers, and each *almost certainly* held letters, tied with bows of ribbon, sprinkled with sticks of lavender or rose leaves" (89, italics added). The drawers of the cabinets could be seen by a visitor in the drawing room, while the contents of the drawers are speculation. The line that follows is equally unequivocal – "For it was another fact – if facts were what one wanted – that Isabella had known many people, had had many friends" (89) – but considered with the end revelation of Isabella having "had no friends" (93), any faith in linguistic or stylistic cues to narrative accuracy becomes impossible.

      "Against positivism, which halts at phenomena – 'There are only *facts*' – I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact 'in itself'... 'Everything is subjective,' you say; but even this is interpretation" (Nietzsche 383). The pre-modernist belief and the modernist hope for an objective reality are undermined by the narrator's equally fallacious reversal of her previous imaginings. Isabella is no more "perfectly empty" (93) than she is a "tremulous convolvulus" (88). The danger of the looking-glass lies in the narrator's final acknowledgement of the lack of meaning outside sign systems, as Isabella is forced to become either dehierarchized within the text or nothingness. Though the terminology of post-structuralism was unavailable to Woolf, its tenets were prefigured by writers such as William James and Friedrich Nietzsche allowing for a comfortable but ahistorical retroactive application.

Works Cited

Baldwin, Dean R. *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction.* Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989.

Barzilai, Shuli. "Virginia Woolf's Pursuit of Truth: 'Monday or Tuesday,' 'Moments of Being' and 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass.'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique.* 18.3 (1988): 199-210.

Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will.* Trans. F.L. Pogson. London: Allen & Unwin, 1921.

Briggs, Julia. "'Cut deep and scored thick with meaning': Frame and Focus in Woolf's Later Short Stories." *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction.* Ed. Kathryn N. Benzel and Ruth Hoberman. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 175-191.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.

James, William. "An Interview: Pragmatism - What It Is." *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings.* Ed. H.S. Thayer. New York: Mentor, 1970. 131-134.

Johnson, Barbara. "Introduction." *Dissemination.* By Jacques Derrida. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Will to Power." *The Theory of Criticism: From Plato to the Present.* Ed. Raman Selden. London: Longman, 1988. 383-385.

Woolf, Virginia. "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection." *A Haunted House and Other Stories.* San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1972. 87-93.