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VIRGINIA WOOLF AND CHARLOTTE MEW: AN EXPLORATION OF MADNESS IN  
MODERNIST WRITING

CORINNE FIERRO  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Christopher Reed  
Professor of English and Visual Culture  
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Sternlieb  
Associate Professor of English  
Honors Adviser

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## **ABSTRACT**

Madness in its various definitions has played a role in defining the identity of an artist. The role of madness has been especially crucial in defining the identity of women artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as they used the madness associated with combating their gender roles to forge modernist prose and poetry. For Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Mew, though, this madness was more than a professional tool. It was a visceral struggle that they experienced and witnessed. This project examines how Woolf and Mew explored madness in their writings, and how their mad characters compel readers' sympathy for both these characters and the mad in general.

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## Introduction

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Edward Albee's 1962 play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" seems, at first glance, to include Woolf's name at random, despite its being the title of the piece. The only mention of Woolf in the play comes during a drunken argument between a couple, in which Elizabeth Taylor is jumping on Richard Burton's chest screaming, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" The lack of control in the scene is palpable—the couple is so drunk they can barely function—and the yelling, intended as a joke, falls flat.

So why associate Virginia Woolf, esteemed author, with depressed dysfunctional drunks? Woolf's writings show a confident woman who was unapologetic for being formidable, unpredictable, wild; someone who burst violently out of the social confines of her upbringing and built a career so critically acclaimed that scholars nearly a century later can't say the word "modernism" without her name following close behind. This wildness came with a price, however, as her journal entries and letters reveal. For Woolf, the dark, uncontrolled scene portrayed in Albee's work was a near-constant reality, and though she was at times the confident trailblazer she publicized herself as being, she was also terrified of succumbing to the madness she battled with consistently. One answer to the question, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" might be, then, "Virginia Woolf."

But the tumultuous relationship between modernism and madness was not Woolf's issue alone. Charlotte Mew, Woolf's lesser-known contemporary, shared similar life experiences. Both women grew up in Bloomsbury, both had family members who suffered from insanity, both

committed suicide, and most importantly, both chose to write about insanity. While it is tempting upon reading their works to assume that participating in modernism was easy for these women, a comparison of the two authors suggests that being Virginia Woolf (or Charlotte Mew for that matter) was *not* effortless as Woolf's celebrated publications make it seem. For these pioneering women modernists, there was extraordinary effort, hard work, and even trauma in creating both modernist forms of expression and ways of existing for women artists in the modern world. Part of this effort included investigating madness in their writings. But, while both of these writers' relationships to madness were entwined in their work, they approached them in different ways.

Virginia Woolf, who experienced mental breakdowns throughout her life after the age of thirteen, appears to use her writing to express personal experiences. Woolf's narrative style in *Mrs. Dalloway* and her experimental short fiction is similar to her own letters and diary entries in subject matter and prose. As an expression of Woolf, her insane characters possess a dignity that brings respectability to the insane. Woolf's relationship between her madness and her writing had benefits: on a personal level it allowed her to play out hypothetical scenarios to explore her madness in a way she couldn't in her real life. On a professional level, it had a hand in giving her writing the "moment of being" style that she has since become known for.

Mew's expression of madness in her writing, however, is used for a different purpose. Though she did seek psychiatric treatment throughout her life, it is unclear how pervasive Mew's condition was or if she had any breakdowns before her suicide. She did witness, however, her brother and sister lose their minds and be committed to asylums, which seems to be Mew's motivation for examining insanity in her writing. Mew's poetry seeks to create sympathy for the insane from an observer's perspective. Her mad characters appear to be innocent victims of their

condition, either ignorant of how they distress the sane around them, or apologetic but powerless to change their condition.

While Charlotte Mew and Virginia Woolf use their writings to investigate madness for different purposes, their works share similarities. Both Mew and Woolf create insane characters that retain a dignity and logical thought process that is recognizably similar to that of the sane, which communicates a separate but equal relationship between the two perspectives. This portrayal is complicated, however, by a palpable fear of insanity in both writers' works. Mew's writings are wrought with the struggle between deeming the insane inhuman and arguing for their humanity. Woolf's Septimus, meanwhile, spends most of his narration detailing paranoid thoughts about being labeled as insane. Ultimately, though, both authors accomplish the same end: creating sympathy in readers for insane characters and insane individuals at large.

This paper will establish the connection between insanity in the lives of Charlotte Mew and Virginia Woolf and insanity in their writing. More importantly, this paper will examine how insanity in the works of these authors invokes sympathy in readers. The first chapter will discuss the history of "artistic madness" using Rudolf and Margaret Wittkower's *Born Under Saturn* as an authority on how the term has evolved. This analysis is paired with Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* in order to establish an understanding of how these women would have viewed themselves as woman authors, artists, and insane individuals. Chapter two will detail Woolf's biographical information, specifically focusing on fluctuations in her mental condition. This will be presented in conjunction with Woolf's writings involving characters identified as insane or prose that bears a resemblance to Woolf's private writings when she was deteriorating mentally. This comparison will establish Woolf's involvement of her personal life in her writings, and how Woolf's inclusions of these experiences affect readers.

Chapter three will follow the same format, comparing Charlotte Mew's personal relationship with madness to the madness in her writings in order to establish connection. These writings will then be analyzed in detail to establish Charlotte Mew's intention in writing sympathy-provoking mad characters and their affect on readers.

## Chapter 1

The title of “artist” is a complex one, having been constructed in different historical moments from period-dependent views on behaviors, science, and what it meant to be talented. In their book, *Born Under Saturn*, published in 1963, Rudolf and Margaret Wittkower offer a history of how the identity of the artist came to be, drawing on historical evidence to find the root of what was by the 1960s the widely accepted “‘otherness’ of artists” (xix). In this otherness lies an implication crucial to this project: the idea that artists are different from “normal” people (xix).

The Wittkowers argue that historically the eccentricity of artists has been separate from other mental disorders. Plato connected artists and insanity with his idea of *mania*, which was based on the belief that those who were inspired by divine beauty were transported into a state of divine madness (98). The return of Platonic ideas in the Renaissance popularized the label of madness as an explanation for the bizarre behaviors of artists. This, in turn, brought about a resurgence of the idea of artistic “mania.” At the time Giorgio Vasari wrote *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters*, the notion that “artistic talent is granted to man at the expense of emotional balance” (100) was pervasive—the greater the artist the greater the imbalance.

The strongest cases of artistic madness the Wittkowers make are the reputations of Michelangelo Buonarroti and Leonardo da Vinci, who were both widely known to be great artists as well as great eccentrics. According to the Wittkowers, Michelangelo was “rough in manner, over-sensitive, uncompromising...he lived a solitary, squalid life...removed from social intercourse and from the glamour of the papal court, despite his almost unbelievable success as

an artist” (72). However, he acknowledged his manner as being a part of his connection to a higher inspiration, writing in his last poem: “Entire understanding none can have/Before he’s not experienced the immensity/Of art and life” (qtd. in Wittkower 74), implying that art provides a complete, almost superhuman understanding. The fervor with which Michelangelo created implies that he felt this connection to art with an almost incessant passion that interrupted his individual existence, as he wrote to his brother Buonarroto: ““I live here in great distress and the utmost bodily fatigue, have no friends and seek none. I have not even time enough to eat what I require”” (qtd. in 74). Michelangelo’s commitment to creation was, in a sense, not of his own volition. Rather, he seemed possessed by his inspiration, constantly producing, without comfort or regard for himself.

Leonardo da Vinci, likewise, led a solitary life based on the pursuit of artistic perfection and minimal emotional ties, according to the Wittkowers. Vasari mentioned da Vinci’s eccentricities including his extravagant manner of dressing and the fact that he was a professed vegetarian, an extreme oddity at the time (77). The Wittkowers argue that Da Vinci’s elusiveness was openly acknowledged, and acted to create a shroud of mystery around the artist whose “general meditations, interspersed here and there, seem to be evidence of his desire to avoid, as far as humanly possible, the distractions of the humdrum of daily life and the temptations of personal attachment” (75).

While the Wittkowers trace the title “mad artist” back to the Renaissance, they use psychoanalytic critic William Phillips’ 1957 definition to provide an idea of what the “mad artist” meant at the time of their book’s publication. Phillips said that a “mad artist” was “a mythical picture of the creative man: inspired, rebellious, dedicated, obsessive, alienated, as well as neurotic” (qtd. in 101). The use of the word “mythical” conveys the idea that the “mad artist”

is a story that became naturalized through the process of myth. According to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, myth is generated by pairing ideas with descriptive language or pictures in a way that explanations, rather than something intentionally fabricated to explain. Barthes argues that "what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason" (10). The reader or consumer of myth, therefore, "does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship" (11). The myth of the "mad artist" is no different. Once the myth of the connection between mental instability and artistic talent was created, separation between the average individual and the artist developed, giving the artist a tangible status of being a sort of otherworldly, superior being.

The famous artists of our time have certainly lived up to this label, sacrificing interpersonal relationships, hygiene, and even health in the name of their art. This set of behaviors present in artists has become an indicator of greatness. The use of the title "mad artist," though clearly flawed in the sense that madness does not guarantee genius, is evidence of onlookers' attempts to explain these artists' behaviors. Van Gogh's belief that he could taste the colors of his paint, Dalí's reference to himself in the third person, and the performance of outlandish behavior have all come to be understood as side effects of artistic inspiration—eccentricity communicates authenticity.

Although madness and acclaim could be complementary for male artists from the Renaissance, using eccentricities to gain popularity was not such a natural process for female artists. The writers this essay is concerned with were hampered, as women authors attempting to

publish work in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were faced with the dilemma of their sex. In order to gain the privilege of publishing, women had to separate themselves from the female identity that had been prescribed to them. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* published in 1979 examines the works of female writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their struggle to combat the roles to which they were confined, mainly through the use of mad female characters (xi). *Madwoman* has since been praised as an essential feminist piece, having pioneered a new way of examining women's writings during that time period. Gilbert and Gubar seek to understand how women artists, as they call them, struggled "free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society" (xii) and thus "recover not only a major (and neglected) female literature but a whole (neglected) female history" (xii). Feminists welcomed this three-part analysis concerning the female writer, which first "involves her battle with male precursors" (518). The second deals with the woman writer's self-definition after shirking the limited role handed to her, and the third attempts "to restore or remember the fragments of a lost story, that of woman's wholeness" to reconstruct "the career of the mythic woman artist who is the 'mother of us all'" (519).

Gilbert and Gubar argue that the notion of women writers complicated gender definitions: "when such creative energy appears in a woman it may be anomalous, freakish, because as a 'male' characteristic it is essentially 'unfeminine'"(10). Forging this new image meant sacrifice for women writers. In a society rigidly structured by sex roles, they surrendered in many aspects their appeal as women in exchange for, as Gilbert and Gubar comment, "isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis" (51). By abandoning their feminine identity, women who "did *not* apologize for their literary efforts... were defined as mad or monstrous: freakish because 'unsexed' or freakish because sexually 'fallen'"(63).

According to Gilbert and Gubar, The way male writers portrayed women in novels during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries added to this struggle, as women had very few roles—Angels in the House, castrating mothers, or some combination of the two—that were deemed acceptable. Women writers were faced with the choices of embracing the limited artistic expressions designated to their sex or attempting to prove that they were just as good as men at a masculine practice. Moreover, in choosing to pursue a male-dominated discipline they opened themselves up to attacks from male predecessors and contemporaries. The woman writer was thus forced, Gilbert and Gubar argue, “(if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image” (17). This redefinition came with benefits, though. Women writers saw themselves, according to Gilbert and Gubar, as “pioneers in a creativity so intense that their male counterparts [had] probably not experienced” (49). Women writers struggled against the male prescription of what a “good” woman was—innocent, subservient, physically and mentally weak—and created a less feminine, more obscure identity.

Patterns discussed in *Madwoman* can be seen clearly in the career of Virginia Woolf, who writes in her essay “Professions for Women” that “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (*Death* 238). The Angel in the House, a nineteenth century literary creation invented by male writers, was, as Woolf puts it:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily... Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. (237)

The Angel in the House, a myth much like the “mad artist,” embodied the limitations of the sex roles assigned to women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to create new acceptable roles for themselves, Woolf suggests women writers had to disassociate themselves from her. This process required abandoning the conventional role of what it meant to be a woman, and more importantly, giving up her “purity.”

Socially, the implications of this were immense—women who no longer fit into their sex roles were abnormal, which brought the questioning of their sanity. For Woolf, there was the added complication of actually struggling with mental illness. Various scholars have assessed her illness in different ways, ranging from specific diagnoses using current terminology to asserting that her madness was entirely the product of patriarchal oppression. Critics debate the consistency of her insanity; Stephen Trombley, for instance, cites that his reason for writing *All that Summer She was Mad* was to prove that “The Virginia Woolf of *Three Guineas* was perfectly sane; and, what is more, her comments in that work may be seen, in retrospect, to have been startlingly clear and informed” (2). But there are flaws in these analyses, specifically those like Trombley’s, which claim to be able to explain Woolf’s reasoning for her behavior as though she explicitly wrote it out. Trombley, for example, writes that Woolf’s violence towards her family and nurses was “because she felt she was being persecuted. Her own reasons for this feeling can be reconstructed, and they make sense” (5). His claim cannot be proved in a tangible, reliable way as Woolf is not alive to vouch for herself. Rather than attempting to solve the mystery of Woolf’s madness and get to the “truth” of her condition, this essay will focus on how women modernists like Woolf addressed their status as mad. While male artists were historically praised for eccentricities, woman artists such as Woolf had to perform an elaborate juggling act

to transform the negative aspects of their associations with madness—whether social or medical or some combination—into the artistic madness that would give their work added appeal.

## Chapter 2

Woolf's mental status was an issue she struggled with her whole adult life. Though what she described as "those terrible times" when she was "mad" (Bell 226) were beneficial to her writings in times of mania, her depressive periods, the periods that were "terrible" (Bell 226), left her mentally crippled for months. The connection between Woolf's life experiences and her writing style is strong enough to suggest that her writings are not only a form of catharsis but also a way to use her madness to make her writing unique and therefore appealing to others. Woolf used her writings to explore scenarios that she was terrified would come to fruition in reality, but also framed those fears in a way that was new and fascinating to readers.

Virginia Woolf was born on January 25, 1882, the seventh of eight children—four from previous marriages—of Leslie and Julia Stephen. Woolf described herself in autobiographical essays that were compiled after her death into the book *Moments of Being* as "descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a large connection, born not of rich parents, but of well-to-do parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world" (65). Woolf described her parents' relationship of one of love and respect, and her childhood until her mother's death as "ordered with great simplicity and regularity...our duties were very plain and our pleasures absolutely appropriate. Earth gave all the satisfaction we asked" (28). Some aspects of Woolf's family life contradict this description of her childhood, however. Woolf's half-sister, Laura Makepeace Stephen, was a constant disturbing presence in the Stephen household. About eleven years Woolf's senior, Laura, as Woolf described her, was a "vacant-eyed girl whose idiocy was becoming daily more

obvious, who could hardly read, who would throw the scissors into the fire, who was tongue-tied and stammered and yet had to appear at the table with the rest of us” (*Moments* 160). Laura lived with the family until she was institutionalized in 1891. Woolf’s description of her sister reveals a familial divide confirmed by her father’s *Mausoleum Book*: “I will never forget the shock to me... We had sent Laura to a ‘kindergarten’ and the Mistress told me she would never learn to read” (92). Woolf’s cousin James Kenneth Stephen was also institutionalized, and her brother Thoby attempted to jump out of a window in March of 1894 and again in April of that same year (Leaska xxxii).

While the Woolf boys attended public school and then Cambridge, the girls were taught at home (Bell 26). Woolf wrote that her mother took on the responsibility of teaching the children, and “thus established a very close and rather trying relationship, for she was of a quick temper, and least of all inclined to spare her children” (*Moments* 38-39). This intimate, daily relationship would have created a stronger female influence on Vanessa and Virginia, though according to Woolf’s writings this did not translate to emotional closeness. Woolf’s portrayal of her mother is somewhat conflicted—In the first essay of *Moments of Being*, her descriptions are almost excessively affectionate and admiring. She wrote of her mother’s astonishing beauty, of her mannerisms, and even the majesty of her hand gestures (36). In an essay later on in the book, however, Woolf clarifies that her mother was more of a presence than a human being. Woolf wrote:

I suspect the word ‘central’ gets closest to the general feelings I had of living so completely in her atmosphere that one never got far enough away from her to see her as a person...She was the whole thing...I see now...why it was that it was impossible for her to leave a very private and particular impression upon a child. (83)

The impression her mother left was strong enough that when she died, Woolf understood that the life she had known was over. Woolf wrote of that day: “she was the center; it was herself. This was proved on May 5th, 1895. For after that day there was nothing left of it...everything had come to an end” (84). As she was looking at her mother’s dead body, she told her half-sister Stella that she had seen a man sitting with her. Woolf recalled: “Stella looked at me as if I had frightened her. Did I say that in order to attract attention to myself? Or was it true?...But certainly it was true that when she said: ‘Forgive me,’ and thus made me visualize my mother, I seemed to see a man sitting bent on the edge of the bed” (92). Woolf had her first mental breakdown soon after, when she was only thirteen. This first break down is poorly documented. Woolf produced no diary entries during this time, and in “A Sketch of the Past,” she presents the sadness following her mother’s death as being an appropriate reaction: “We were quite naturally unhappy” (*Moments* 45), as though she is attempting to disguise the events as something more mild despite the fact the essay was written to be read aloud to her closest friends and sister, who knew her mental instability intimately.

Woolf’s autobiographical essays indicate that these moments of losing touch with reality continued to occur into her adulthood. Though some of them scared her, they were precious to her and fueled her love of writing. In “A Sketch of the Past,” she calls them “moments of being,” a term she uses to describe times of pure existence—of living in the moment. The first “was the moment of the puddle in the path; when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle” (78). This memory seems ethereal to Woolf. She is so fixated on the puddle that she is wholly present in the moment. She has achieved a connection to what she describes as a hidden pattern “that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with...that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work

of art...we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (72). The second moment, though, is a horrific encounter with a boy she describes as an "idiot boy" (*Moments* 78) an insane boy on a path in the park that sends her into shock for the rest of the day. These two moments, one of pure bliss the other of pure horror, are presented as the two examples of "moments of being" that Woolf will always remember. Woolf writes that the moments of being propel her forward in writing: "it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means it has lost its power to hurt me" (72). She adds that writing about these moments is "perhaps...the strongest pleasure known to [her]" (72). In her relationship to her "moments" Woolf reveals the core of her writing. She is not only attempting to recreate the feeling of living in the moment, which explains her use of the all-seeing eye to convey a sense of being in someone's head, but also to disable the power the moments of horror have over her. In writing, Woolf is giving herself the control over perception that she lacks in real life. The nature of these moments—one brilliant and one disturbing—are reflective of Woolf's existence, too. There was, it seems, very little separation between the sane and insane aspects of Woolf.

Virginia and her family began to understand the thinness of the line between sane and insane when she had her next mental breakdown nine years later. Upon her father's death, Virginia became so distraught that she threw herself out of a window that was too low to the ground to kill her (Bell 90). As she grew older, these psychotic breaks continued, and she negotiated her literary career as well as her personal life around her mental stability. Soon after she married Leonard Woolf, she began to have headaches, which deteriorated over the course of months at the beginning of 1913 to become her most serious break down yet. Because of her unstable mental condition, according to a letter she sent to Violet Dickinson on April 11, 1913,

she and Leonard moved to Asheham House in Sussex. “We shall live here more or less this summer, but spend one out of 3 weeks in London. We aren’t going to have a baby, but we want to have one, and 6 months in the country or so is said to be necessary first,” (*Letters* 22-23) Woolf wrote.

By the end of July 1913, Woolf’s health had declined to such an extent that she was moved back to her nursing home in rural Twickenham, where she had stayed during her last breakdown. She was well enough to write Leonard love letters daily (V. Woolf, *Letters* 32). Woolf’s tone in her letters is worried, almost frantic with missing Leonard. In many letters she says that she wishes she were with him, but that “this is best” (33). She refers to her “vile imaginations” (34), though she never elaborates. The instability of her condition is evident in a letter she wrote Leonard on August 3: “I’ve not been very good I’m afraid—but I do think it will be better when we’re together. Here its all so unreal” (33). Leonard’s letters are overwhelmingly positive, as he writes to her on August 2: “I am happy dearest, simply because of my absolute faith in you & the knowledge that in a week we shall be looking back at these days as a nightmare that is over.” (188)

Later in August, Leonard took Virginia to the Plough Inn in Somerset where they had stayed after their marriage, but Virginia became so depressed that they soon returned to London. On September 9, 1913, Virginia attempted suicide by taking an overdose of veronal, a widely available barbiturate. Earlier that same morning, Sir George Savage, Virginia’s doctor, wrote to Leonard saying, “I hardly know how or what to write for the uncertainty of the patient leaves me helpless” (L. Woolf 190). Though she survived, she did not write any letters from August 5 through December 4 (V. Woolf, *Letters* 32), or at least none have been recorded. On September 30, Leonard wrote to Janet Case, a close friend of Virginia’s:

I believe when she [Virginia] was well she told you that, if she was ever like this again, she thought she would listen to you. She used often to say the same things to me about me—that if I told her that she was ill & could get well by doing things, she would believe me, & that if she had known me at the time she never would have had her first breakdown. But it is not true of me or of you. One can see it is so purely a physical thing: she *cannot* believe. (L. Woolf 193)

In subsequent letters, Leonard notes that Virginia is making slow progress, and continues to care for her throughout her recovery through the spring of 1914. In the years to come, though, Virginia moved between London and the country as her health strengthened and weakened.

Leonard Woolf wrote in his autobiography:

If, when she was well, any situation or argument arose which was closely connected with her breakdowns or the causes of them, there would sometimes rise to the surface of her mind traces or echoes of the nightmares and delusions of her madness, so that it seemed as if deep down in her mind she was never completely sane. (qtd. in Alexander 90)

Despite this constant battle, Woolf maintained her literary career and produced works throughout this period, finding that in between bouts of illness, she was especially productive. Even late into her life, however, she was haunted by thoughts of worthlessness at not being able to meet the standard of the ideal woman set before her whom she had tried so hard to kill. She wrote in her diary in 1926:

Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh its beginning its coming—the horror—physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart—tossing me up. I'm unhappy unhappy! Down—God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I feeling this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch.

Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes; I detect that. Failure failure. (The wave rises.) (*Diary 2* 110)

In this diary entry, elements of Woolf's unstable mental condition are evident in the physical presence of her sadness, personified by a wave. Woolf literally watches the wave of sadness rise and fall, as she attempts to understand why she feels so depressed. The beginning of the entry in particular—"Oh its beginning its coming—the horror"—could imply that she felt that another breakdown was coming upon her. The phrasing of the diary entry emphasizes her lack of control in her emotional state, as the wave of sadness "[tosses her] up." As World War Two approached, her condition grew worse. Her letters and diary entries are punctuated with notes on the despair she felt about London, the city she loved, being ruined by bombs. On March 29, 1941, Woolf wrote a note to her husband Leonard that read, "I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another one of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate...I can't fight it any longer" (Bell 226), and drowned herself in a nearby river.

Woolf, therefore, perpetually walked that fine line between sane and insane, battling against the blur of insanity seeping into her consciousness. As someone who suffered from mental instability throughout her life, however, Woolf's descriptions of real people who were afflicted with insanity are significantly harsher than her evocation of fictional characters. Why does Woolf, in her autobiographical essays for instance, show no empathy for her half-sister, Laura? When Woolf wrote that Laura's "idiocy was becoming daily more obvious" she seemed to imply that Laura's condition should prevent her from being included with the rest of the family. Woolf wrote the essays included in *Moments of Being* to be read to friends and family for entertainment, and her presentation of her half-sister in this context suggests her strong desire to

distance herself from Laura's behavior. Woolf either saw Laura's condition, which appears to be mental retardation, as something repulsive and unrelated to her own, or was unable to show empathy because Laura's condition embodied a part of herself that she was unwilling to face. Woolf establishes a distinction between her status as an intellectual with a debilitating disease and those who are fully disabled, but her reactions are exaggerated, indicating fear. This shunning of the mentally handicapped occurs more than once during Woolf's childhood. The treatment of Laura recalls her "moments of being" with the "idiot boy" who "sprang up with his hand outstretched mewling, slit-eyed, red-rimmed" as she walked through the park (*Moments* 78). His features and behaviors are inhuman—he springs and meows like an animal. Woolf quickly gives him her toffee, but is disturbed by the interaction, saying:

That night in the bath the dumb horror came over me. Again I had that hopeless sadness; that collapse I have described before; as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow...I huddled up at my end of the bath, motionless. I could not explain it; I said nothing even to Nessa sponging herself at the other end. (78)

This uneasiness and even anger towards those with mental illness continues into Woolf's adult life; Woolf later expressed the horror she experienced in encountering a line of mentally disabled people on a towpath while on a walk with her husband in a diary entry from January 9, 1915:

On the tow path we met & had to pass a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall young man, just queer enough to look twice at, but no more; the second shuffled, and looked aside; and then one realized that everyone in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or

a wild suspicious state. It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed. (*Diary* 13)

Woolf's relationship to mental disability is complex and extreme. Beyond a disgust for those who are not entirely present mentally or deformed physically, Woolf negates their humanity altogether. They don't have the right to coexist with normal people, let alone the right to live.

Janet Lyon argues that Woolf's shocking ending to her passage:

means, in part, that "they" should be evacuated from our public world (in one way or another) because their shocking presence among us disrupts, permanently, universalist presumptions of a stable normality. This kind of shock, for someone like Woolf, must surely extend to her own tenuous mental sovereignty. The sudden appearance of the face of the idiot declares, in effect, that all bets are off; (559)

The shock of encountering mentally disabled individuals is exacerbated by the setting—a peaceful walk on a path with Leonard. It is as though her calm, normal reality can be shattered just as completely and with as little warning as her walk. Woolf's diary entry, Lyon notes, becomes increasingly panicked, as she cannot escape the faces of the line of "idiots:" "Emerging in the place of the expected normal, these denizens of a parallel world of abnormality materialize literally in front of her face, and she must pass each face, each grin and wild stare, one by one" (558). And in these faces, Woolf can clearly see the disability that she dreads, that she sees in herself.

In contrast to the unmitigated horror and cruel reaction Woolf evinces toward the mad in her diaries and autobiographical essays, her incorporation of her mad perspective gives her writings their famous modernist characteristics. Her short story "An Unwritten Novel" bears a strong similarity to the moments she describes in "Sketches of the Past" in which she loses touch

with reality. The narrative moves at breakneck speed, though the narrator and the subjects she describes are sitting still on a train. There is a rambling quality to the narration as well that is similar to Woolf's letters to her husband while she was in Twickenham:

Life's what you see in people's eyes; life's what they learn, and, having learnt it, never, though they seek to hide it, cease to be aware of—what? That life's like that, it seems. Five faces opposite—five mature faces—and the knowledge in each face. Strange, though, how people want to conceal it! (V. Woolf, "Unwritten")

It is not uncommon for Woolf's experimental short fictions to take place in the mind of an immobile narrator—"The Mark on the Wall" takes place while the narrator sits in a chair, staring at the wall. It is also characteristic of Woolf to use many narrators and shift perspectives without much warning, as *Mrs. Dalloway* shows. "An Unwritten Novel," however, has a runaway quality to it—as though its narrator has lost control of the speed of the narrative and where it's going. Where "The Mark on the Wall" feels like a logical tour of an argument, "An Unwritten Novel" feels uncomfortable, confusing, and a little bit frightening as readers visualize sitting on the train with a woman who can't stop twitching or muttering nonsense to herself. Following a spasm witnessed in the passenger sitting across from her on the train, the narrator reports:

And then the spasm went through me; I crooked my arm and plucked at the middle of my back. My skin, too, felt like the damp chicken's skin in the poulterer's shop-window; one spot between the shoulders itched and irritated, felt clammy, felt raw. Could I reach it? Surreptitiously I tried. She saw me. A smile of infinite irony, infinite sorrow, flitted and faded from her face. But she had communicated, shared her secret, passed her poison; she would speak no more. (V. Woolf, "Unwritten")

While it is unclear whether the woman across from the narrator is controlling her or if they share the same body momentarily, the description is grotesque. The skin is repulsive and unnatural, which frames the phrase “She had communicated, shared her secret, passed her poison” in a way that suggests that her fellow passenger has infected her with something dark and inhuman, which subsequently infects the narrative, as it begins to decay further.

As the story progresses, the narrator’s status becomes increasingly unclear. The narrative follows Minnie, the woman across from the former narrator, into her sister-in-law’s house, at which point the story becomes significantly less logical. The narrator is not Minnie, but instead seems to be a disembodied voice talking to Minnie, though Minnie never replies. The narrator ends the story standing at the train station and says to herself “Well, my world’s done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That’s not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life’s bare as bone” (“Unwritten”), completely negating the entire story. The narrator has lost touch with reality—she exists in a fantasy world that has intruded upon the narrative. Woolf’s failure to acknowledge this change allows readers to feel the slow-growing dismay of existing in an uncertain, quickly dissolving perspective—much like Woolf’s horror that her walk with Leonard could be disrupted by a group of mentally disabled people. Woolf’s use of her mad perspective works to give “An Unwritten Novel” an edgy, modernist feel. Much like Woolf’s own condition, however, this edge often degrades into something much darker and less controlled. We can understand, then, that for Woolf, a mad perspective, though terrifying to her in others and herself, was a useful tool in entering the modernist scene.

Woolf uses madness again in *Mrs. Dalloway* to develop a uniquely modernist perspective, but to a different end. Instead, she creates Septimus, a mad character who, contrary to opinions in her journal entries and letters, is logical and astute because he is an expression of

Woolf's own condition. In Septimus, we see Woolf closely examining her anxiety about being labeled insane and suffering through the sickness itself. Woolf approaches her own condition differently—she knows she is intelligent and deserving of a position in the sane world, and madness is an impediment to this position that she must constantly battle alone. The insane people she sees on the street and writes about in her diary are nameless, voiceless faces of the out-group to which she is scared she belongs. Through Septimus, Woolf seems to present her own sadness and frustration of losing touch with the sane world, her own fear of being labeled as insane, her own inability to cope with her condition.

While the narration of other characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* is somewhat scattered, their thoughts are familiar random musings that are securely rooted in reality. Woolf differentiates Septimus by having his thoughts communicate a sense of fragility to readers from his introduction in the novel. His perception of the world seems faulty, as though it is perpetually moments away from crumbling into complete incoherence. When readers first encounter Septimus, he is looking at the supposed royal car. The narration describes his thought: “The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames...Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?” (15). Immediately readers understand that Septimus is not stable—he overwhelms us with flitting thoughts and questions that have nothing to do with what is taking place in front of him. Septimus' attribution of nonsensical significance to ordinary events sets his thoughts apart from the imaginings of other characters. For instance, when the plane is spelling words in the sky, Mrs. Bletchley describes it as moving “exactly where it liked, swiftly, freely, like a skater” (21). Her perceptions are fanciful, but not irrational, and she takes pleasure in her thoughts rather than being debilitated by their presence. Septimus, however, thinks upon seeing the writing:

“So...they are signaling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words” (22). Septimus takes an event that clearly has nothing to do with him and applies immense, otherworldly value to it. Instead of understanding that a plane is writing in the sky, he sees the writing as a signal from a “they” that is never elaborated on. This “they” seems to have a god-like power that leaves Septimus in a reverie at the message’s beauty, and yet readers know that his view is completely distorted from reality because Woolf allows us to see sane characters’ perspectives. Septimus’ narration calls to mind the urgent, flitting tone of “An Unwritten Novel,” as well as the sense of implication by a force that is clearly unrelated. Just as the woman across from the narrator in “An Unwritten Novel” had no control over the narrator’s actions, the plane is not sending a message to Septimus. This narration makes readers nervous: Septimus communicates that he could collapse at any moment, that there is no logic to his rants, and he has no control.

The similarities between “An Unwritten Novel” and Septimus’ narration is important in that Septimus is meant to be seen as mad, while “An Unwritten Novel” was written with no identified insane characters. This commonality calls attention to how thin the line is between Woolf’s labeled insane character and her characteristic narration style. A passage from Woolf’s essay “Kew Gardens” could easily be an internal monologue narrated by Septimus:

and it was real, all real, he assured himself, fingering the coin in his pocket, real to everyone except to him and to her; even to him it began to seem real; and then—but it was too exciting to stand and think any longer, and he pulled the parasol out of the earth with a jerk and was impatient to find the place where one had tea with other people, like other people. (*Complete* 88)

Even some of Woolf's narration attributed to Mrs. Dalloway, a sane character, in *Mrs. Dalloway* bears a similar style:

but in the course of ages, long as summer days, and flaming, she remembered, with nothing but red asters, he had gone...and when at last she laid her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth, now become a mere cinder of ice, she implored Gods to lay by her side a bunch of purple heather...for then the pageant of the universe would be over.”  
(81)

In both works, elements in common with Septimus' monologues appear: contemplation of the universe and questioning whether or not the world around the narrator is real. The same overwhelming sense of the immensity of the thoughts is present as well—all of Woolf's narrators, insane or sane, seem to slip into these moments where they can't think fast enough about enough things. If readers are meant to feel that the narrators of “Kew Gardens” and *Mrs. Dalloway* are in control, the implication is that sane and insane are not so distant from one another, which was true of Woolf herself.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf questions how clearly others can see insanity. Every interaction Septimus has can be seen as a sort of paranoid sane-judging-insane play to determine if other characters notice this lack of control and normalcy. Woolf attacks herself and confirms her worst fears through characters' judgments of Septimus. Then, she backpedals with another character observing Septimus as normal, as if to reassure herself that she is not as different as she thinks. When Maisie Johnson passes the couple in Regents park, she thinks that “Both seemed queer...he seemed awfully odd; quarrelling, perhaps; parting for ever, perhaps; something was up, she knew...(For that young man had given her quite a turn. Something was up she knew.) Horror! Horror!” (27). And yet Maisie is not quite normal either, which undermines the trustworthiness

of her feelings about Septimus. She includes in her nervous thoughts that everything in London seems strange, not just Septimus. Peter Walsh, too, notices that Rezia looks “absolutely desperate” (70) and wonders to himself: “what awful fix had they gotten themselves into, both to look so desperate as that on a fine summer morning?” (71). But he dismisses what he sees as a lover’s quarrel. After witnessing the two opposing thoughts wrestle for dominance, readers are left with no clear conclusion. Instead, we have a vague understanding of what Woolf’s view of her condition was.

If Septimus takes the role of Woolf’s worries of slipping into madness, Rezia is the mouthpiece for Woolf’s insecurities concerning the perceptions of those around her: other people must know Woolf is slipping, her caretaker must think she’s selfish and her behavior exaggerated. She undercuts the validity of her own condition in Rezia’s view of Septimus as having “nothing whatever seriously the matter with him”(21). He is simply “a little out of sorts” (21). What Woolf suggested in her suicide note—that Leonard would be better off without her—Rezia confirms with accusations of Septimus’ selfishness. She thinks to herself, “She put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her...He was selfish...She spread her hand before her. Look!...she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered—but nobody to tell” (23). In Rezia’s view of Septimus, Woolf enacts the guilt she feels for consuming her husband’s time and attention while proving her own worry that she is a burden. Rezia is ashamed of him, constantly wondering if people are noticing his behavior.

The disconnect between how others see Septimus and what Septimus’ narration reveals to readers conveys the incompatibility of the mad and sane perspectives. Rezia views Septimus’ condition as something that takes attention away from her, and her lack of empathy leaves Septimus to approach his condition alone. Septimus notices this, thinking: “That was it: to be

alone forever. That was the doom pronounced in Milan when he came into the room...He was alone, exposed on this bleak eminence, stretched out” (145). By providing readers with both Septimus and Rezia’s points of view, Woolf forces readers to both suffer Septimus’ condition, and also to understand his isolation. Thus, readers experience the frustration of a mad/sane person relationship. Readers want Rezia to acknowledge the severity of Septimus’ illness, and yet we are never satisfied because Rezia cannot communicate with Septimus to understand what he needs. Readers long for this connection, and desire to give Septimus what Rezia cannot. Possibly, Woolf felt that even though she had the support of her husband, she was facing insanity alone. This is noticeable in her suicide note when she says that she is certain she will not get better—even with the support of her husband, her condition is ultimately hers alone, and she cannot overcome it.

Woolf’s published works can be seen in two lights: as a method to explore her madness in ways that she was afraid to in reality and as art intentionally influenced by madness. The similarities between Woolf’s personal writings and those in her published short stories and *Mrs. Dalloway* indicate that Woolf was attempting to capture those “moments of being” in which she lost touch with reality. These “moments” are captured for a personal, investigative purpose, but also create an acclaimed modernist style that would have spoken to the instability of many of her educated, aspiring women readers who were struggling with similar “mad” labels at the time of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s publication. With the pressure to be modern, there was also the implication of being mad, which would have added to the admiration of Woolf’s use of her madness to further her own ends.

### Chapter 3

Charlotte Mew's life was eerily parallel to Virginia Woolf's—they were contemporaries, both lived in Bloomsbury and knew of one another, yet Mew has faded into near obscurity. Of the vast expanse of scholarship concerning Virginia Woolf, less than five pieces have been published on the life of Charlotte Mew. This absence of scholarship can be attributed to Mew's small body of published work and an inexplicable lack of interest in her writings. Even now, Mew remains on the periphery of modernist studies, and unlike Woolf, no journal entries detailing her life and feelings have survived to bring about a resurgence of popularity. Where Woolf included personal details in her autobiographical essays, diaries, and letters, Penelope Fitzgerald's biography, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends*, suggests that Mew made her letters, the only surviving account of her life, intentionally positive even after her mother died in 1922. She acknowledged sadness only briefly in letters after the death of her sister, despite the fact that her sister's death upset her so deeply that it prompted her to seek treatment for her depression. Instead, Mew chose only to write letters about luncheons and trips, which though meticulously preserved by close friends, offer little insight into her state of mind.

Mew was born on November 15, 1869 to Fred and Anna Maria Mew. Unlike Woolf, who chose the bohemian precinct of Bloomsbury as a respite from her family's upscale Kensington district of London, Mew, whose father was a struggling architect, was born in Bloomsbury. Like Woolf, Mew was raised in a house full of siblings, with six brothers and sisters, though her childhood was punctuated with tragedy and her house was haunted by insanity. Three of Mew's

siblings died in 1876, and as the children grew older, Henry, Mew's eldest brother who was seen as the successor to his father, began to exhibit symptoms of what was then known as *dementia praecox*, what would now be labeled schizophrenia. Henry was committed to Peckham Hospital, where he would remain for the rest of his life. The family then turned its attention to Freda, the youngest child, who was doted upon and progressed through her adolescence into a beautiful and intelligent young woman. But, doomed to the same fate as her brother, Freda began to display symptoms of the disease in the early 1890s. She broke down entirely, and was sent to Whitelands Hospital in rural Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight for another sixty years—outliving all of her siblings. Mew never visited either of her institutionalized siblings, perhaps due to a Woolf-like aversion to the mad. She did, however, continue to pay for their services until she died. The flaw in their genes weighed heavily on Mew and her sister Anne, the only remaining Mew children. Monro blamed a fear of passing on insanity for the sisters' pact to never have children, and therefore never to marry (Fitzgerald 47).

Soon after Freda was committed, Fred Mew died without leaving an estate. This left Charlotte, Anne and their mother, Anna Maria to fend for themselves. Charlotte and Anne Mew supported their mother until her death in 1922, and remained financially responsible for their institutionalized siblings. Mew's close friend and publisher Alida Monro wrote in her introduction to Mew's *Collected Poems* that this responsibility "had a most damaging psychological effect" as Mew had "inherited from her mother a view of life...namely that appearances must be kept up at all costs" (ix). Appearances were hard to maintain. The Mews had little income, as Charlotte Mew's poetry sold poorly and her sister made a meager wage painting (Fitzgerald 74). Monro recalled that Charlotte Mew kept her poor financial circumstances so private that when they met in 1915 she did not realize that the Mews were

renting out the top floors of their house in order to maintain the appearance that they were still well off. Monro commented, “it was felt that such a circumstance was a matter of which to be deeply ashamed” (ix).

Mew felt the pressure of maintaining this lifestyle, according to Monro, but said that she valued family over everything and viewed taking on the position of caretaker as her responsibility (ix). This extreme, even self-destructive, dedication to family and the appearance of middle class status contradict the subject matter and style of Mew’s poetry as well as other aspects of her personality. Monro commented that Mew was two people, simultaneously a modernist and a traditionalist. Contrary to her insistence on maintaining the appearance of her upbringing, Mew was eccentric. Monro wrote that Mew always “stalked” about, and that “She usually carried a horn-handled umbrella, unrolled, under her arm, as if it were psychologically necessary to her, a weapon against the world.” (viii). She smoked hand-rolled cigarettes constantly, or if she wasn’t smoking them, she was still rolling them to give to her pet parrot, Willie, to play with (x).

While those who knew Mew indicate that she did not struggle with psychotic breaks throughout her life in the same way that Woolf did, Fitzgerald records that Mew often consulted her doctor to get her nerves under control (212). But, though she was not suffering breakdowns, insanity was always on Charlotte’s mind in the form of her brother and sister. The constant pressure to support herself, Anne, and Freda must have been overwhelming, and Charlotte Mew’s unstable income never allowed her to forget about her institutionalized sister. These tensions finally reached a breaking point when Anne Mew fell ill with a disease that doctors were unable to diagnose or cure, but has since been speculated to be cancer. In the summer of 1926, Charlotte took Anne to a nursing home at 43 Priory Road, where she stayed with her daily

(206). Anne's death on June 18, 1927 dealt a fatal blow to Mew. The sisters had relied on one another, and Anne was the only family Charlotte had left. After the loss of her sister, Charlotte became increasingly depressed and experienced extreme guilt over her sister's death, fixating on the idea that her sister had been buried alive (211). She instructed in her will the following January that her main artery was to be severed once she had been determined dead.

A.G. Tansley wrote in his June 27, 1944 letter to Sydney Carlyle Cockerell—both close friends of Mew—that he felt that “It was Freda's tragedy, confirming the fear of insanity in herself that probably determined Charlotte's end” (Tansley). Monro said that Freda was “‘like a flame’” (ix), that Charlotte watched fade. Following her sister's death, Mew sought help from a mental specialist, Dr. Cowan, who told her that she could not be certified as insane. He suggested that she enter an asylum, which she refused, entering a nursing home instead. Monro and Mew's other friends commented on the bleakness of Mew's room with its window onto a stone wall (212). Charlotte's choice to enter the home is an indication of her mental state. With so many friends with larger, well-furnished homes who offered her room, she made a point to separate herself. Perhaps Mew already knew that she would kill herself, or at least felt that she did not have the desire to get better. On March 24, 1928, Mew bought a bottle of Lysol. She poured half of it into a glass and drank it. When Dr. Cowan came for a visit, he found her foaming at the mouth and talking to herself. Shortly after, she lost consciousness. Dr. Cowan was able to revive her for a short period, and she said, “Don't keep me, let me go” (Fitzgerald 214).

Charlotte seemed to maintain a conflicted view of insanity that comes through in her actions and her writings. Some of the people she loved most were insane. She had a vested interest in their well-being and this love comes through as sympathy in her writings, which often present the insane as innocent or victims of their condition. Yet Mew's animal and nature

imagery also suggest that insanity lessens a person's humanity. The results of this conflict are insane characters who have a sense of dignity, and whose opinions are presented alongside those of the sane, on an equal yet separate level. Readers understand that by losing their sanity, mentally ill individuals give up the ability to access the sane world and therefore that aspect of humanity. Yet, the condition of Mew's insane characters implores readers to sympathize, to show compassion, similar to the way Septimus compels sympathy in readers. However, where Septimus' voice is astute, Mew's mad characters are often voiceless or child-like, removing the agency that makes Septimus' character familiar to readers and deserving of sympathy.

Mew's first, and perhaps best-known poem, "The Farmer's Bride," shows an innocent bride's transformation from sane to insane. Though the poem is told from the perspective of the farmer, readers come to sympathize with the bride, who emerges as an innocent girl in the hands of an older man. The farmer begins the poem by saying, "Three summers since I chose a maid,/Too young maybe—but more's to do/At harvest-time than bide and woo" (*Collected* 42). In the first lines of the poem, the farmer admits that his bride may have been too young, and alludes to forcing himself on her in his dismissal of courting her—it seems that in his opinion he wasn't willing to take the time to "bide and woo." But what is most important is that the bride begins the poem a sane, normal girl. It is only after they consummate the marriage that, the farmer says, she "turned afraid/Of love and me and all things human; ...Her smile went out, and 'twadn't a woman—/ More like a little frightened fay" (42). The farmer's description of his actions is nonchalant. Readers would not assume from his account that his behavior with his bride was anything out of the ordinary, let alone harmful. But the extent of his wife's trauma is evident in her actions. He reveals that it is common for her to lie awake in bed, as the night that she runs away he says that she "'Should properly have been abed;/But sure enough she wadn't

there/Lying awake with her wide brown stare” (42). His wife is so desperate to get away from him that when they catch her after she runs away she is shaking with fear. The farmer’s behavior becomes even more suspicious when readers consider how much his bride likes to play outside with animals. One line in particular, that she is “Happy enough to chat and play/With birds and rabbits and such as they” (42) suggests that the farmer’s bride is so young that she has not yet grown out of playing pretend.

Mew’s use of the farmer as the narrator, however, undermines the bride’s humanity by not only robbing her of her voice, but also presenting her condition through a character who is actively ignorant of his role in driving her to insanity. Instead of a nuanced explanation from the bride about how the farmer forced her into her condition, readers are instead given the farmer’s rough, uneducated description of her as an animal. After line 3 in the poem, her behavior becomes alien and confusing, her hair becomes feathers, and she runs wild with animals but refuses to talk to humans. This does not seem to deter the farmer’s attraction to her, though, as he says that the only thing separating them is a staircase and adds, “Oh! my God! the down/The soft young down of her, the brown,/The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!” (43). This description in the poem’s closing lines conveys a perverse sexual tone; the farmer is clearly longing for his wife sexually, yet she is described as though she is a baby animal, which adds to readers’ disgust of the farmer. The staircase between them is key to understanding the space between the sane and insane as well. It does not take much effort to climb a staircase. If the farmer truly wanted to be with his wife against her will, which he had no problem with before, then he could simply climb the stairs and close the gap. The farmer’s phrasing makes this action seem impossible, though. He understands that the distance is so small, the effort so little, and yet

he is incapable of reaching her. Mew purposefully emphasizes the negligible physical separation of the two to stress the thinness of the line between the sane and insane.

Readers are presented with two views of the farmer's bride: one of an inhuman girl who refuses to associate with people and is strange to everyone in the village, and another of a young girl who was sane before she was robbed of the ability to lead a normal life. This disconnect is further emphasized by the bride's lack of voice. Readers can only glean fragments of her perspective in the farmer's description of her actions, and we cannot understand her behavior at all. She has lost the ability to communicate with the sane world. The tragedy of the bride's condition makes us yearn to save her from her plight. We sympathize about both the horrible actions that she endured and the misunderstanding of her condition by the farmer and the townspeople. At the same time, though, readers understand that despite how thin the line may be between the sane and insane, the categories are separate. Not only does the bride lack a voice to express her emotion, signifying that communication between her world and the sane world is impossible, but she has become animalistic and therefore lost her humanity with her sanity. The bride's inaccessibility in conjunction with the farmer's animalistic descriptions of her behavior creates a distinction between sane and insane: insane people are not human. This association of the mad with animals and nature comes up repeatedly in Mew's poetry to evoke the parallel yet separate worlds of the mad and sane.

The narrator of Mew's "On the Asylum Road" examines this narrow yet fundamental gap between the two perspectives, but casts the difference between the groups as physical space. As the narrator walks along the asylum road looking into the windows of the building at the patients, he/she is physically separated from those in the asylum. The only access that the narrator has to the patients, the windows, are "made of darkly stained or clouded glass" (*Collected* 73)

emphasizing the sane world's inability to understand the perspective of the mad. This line is paired with a line in the last stanza that reads, "Our windows [the perspective of the sane], too, are clouded glass/To them, yes, every pane!" (74). The narrator recognizes that the misunderstanding between the groups is mutual. In using parallel structure to describe the perspectives in the same way, the mad and the sane are equivalent—their existences are both legitimate, but different.

The third stanza of the poem incorporates nature imagery common in Mew's poetry, and extends the parallel existences of the mad and sane. The stanza begins, "None but ourselves in our long gallery we meet" (74), which could mean that the "we" is either sane people—as the narrator can be assumed to be a sane person based on his/her discussion of the mad as separate from him/herself—or "we" as in people we understand. In either reading, the understanding of the others in the gallery is necessary for them to be grouped in with "ourselves." This implies that there are separate hallways for different groups in our long galleries, or lifetimes, and that sane people would meet other sane people just as insane people would meet other insane people. The stanza then shifts abruptly to nature:

The moor-hen stepping from her reeds with dainty feet,  
 The hare-bell bowing on his stem,  
 Dance not with us; their pulses beat,  
 To fainter music; nor do we to them  
 Make their life sweet. (74)

In this stanza, it is unclear whether the narrator discusses nature literally or uses nature to discuss the insane. In the first scenario, it could be that the narrator argues that we do not understand nature and nature does not understand humanity and neither party cares or impacts

the other for the better—hence the last line—implying that the insane, like the natural world, are foreign to us and we to them. Or, the narrator could be using nature as a metaphor, casting the insane as animals, again referencing the inhumanity of the mad. In both readings, the conclusion is similar: mainstream society and the insane exist on different planes. They and we are so disjointed that they dance to music we can't hear, and we barely impact their existences at all.

Yet while the two perspectives are offered as equal, there are hints in the poem of the subhuman status of the insane that, in conjunction with their isolation, compel sympathy in readers. While Mew suggests that the asylum inmates are less than human, she emphasizes that the sane should feel guilt for the mad people's plight. The asylum inmates stand with a "scattered stare" (74), unable to comprehend the world around them, let alone defend themselves against jokes or physical harm. We feel sympathy for the mad because we want to protect them, to shelter them from a world that they cannot understand or interact with. They are exposed and fragile, like children, and we long to give them the safety and understanding that the sane deny them. The people of the town by the asylum certainly show no mercy, as they have no problem cracking a joke with "the incarnate wages of man's sin" (74). Though the villagers believe themselves to be superior to the mad, however, Mew purposefully uses a phrase that has a dual meaning—"incarnate wages of man's sin" can evoke a sense of shame or Christ-like imagery. The idea that the mad are the result of the sins humanity has committed makes them shameful. On one hand, they are the physical manifestation of the evil we have committed, and therefore inseparable from that evil, on the other, they suffer for our sins, which makes them Christ-like. This reading implies guilt on the part of the sane. The insane take on the burden for our behavior, of which they have no understanding. This would make the mad innocent martyrs suffering for the sinful acts of the sane, which prompts sympathy in readers.

Again Mew has set up a scenario in which readers cannot be satisfied. We sympathize with the deplorable condition of the mad and long to bridge the gap between the two worlds. We feel the same disconnect that the narrator feels in looking at the asylum inmates in the poem. This dynamic appears repeatedly in Mew's poetry, and may illustrate the disconnect she felt when her siblings went insane and were no longer accessible to her both socially and physically. Mew had looked up to her older brother and doted on her younger sister, but when they began to go insane they were irretrievable—they could not come back to sanity. Where Woolf teetered on the line between sane and insane, always returning at least mostly to the sane world until her suicide, Mew's siblings did not recover. Once they began showing symptoms, they were removed from the house and Mew never saw them again. In Mew's mind her siblings lost the ability to function in the sane world. They were gone. Mew's mentioning of the insane as "brother-shadows" points to this—they will always "pass" the sane in their long galleries, but never "meet," just as she never saw her siblings again.

Of all of Mew's poems, "The Changeling" examines the frustration of the sane and insane being unable to connect in the most detail. Mew again incorporates nature imagery, but with more intensity to emphasize that while the insane may appear human, they exist in an entirely different world. "The Changeling" is the only one of Mew's poems that explores insanity from the perspective of a mad individual, and she chooses a child as the narrator, which, when paired with the child's mature tone conveys the child-like innocence of the insane that is present in "On the Asylum Road" more literally. In order to ensure that readers understand its separation from humanity, Mew does not specify the sex of the child. Readers are left with the only option of thinking of the child as an it, rather than a girl or a boy. The poem contradicts itself in its portrayal of the changeling, though. The child belongs to nature and animal imagery

is used to describe it, yet its mind is recognizably human. The narrator bears a strong resemblance to humanity in its understanding of what its parents want, and also in apologizing for disappointing them, which gives the poem a heartbreakingly sad tone that appeals to readers' sympathy. This tone is familiar to readers and lessens the stigma of unpredictability and lack of logic that goes with insanity. The narrator seems to understand what its parents want, but simply cannot comply for an unexplained reason. It says it:

Couldn't do my sums, or sing,  
 Or settle down to anything.  
 And when, for that, I was sent upstairs  
 I *did* kneel down to say my prayers; (*Collected* 70)

The narrator of the poem is aware of what its parents want, and understands that it is perpetually disappointing them, although it stresses that it did try. The narrator's tone is tinged with remorse throughout the poem, and it is clear that it really does want its parents' love, as it cites examples multiple times when it tried to do what a normal child does:

'Times I pleased you, dear Father, dear Mother,  
 Learned all my lessons and liked to play,  
 And dearly I loved the little pale brother  
 Whom some other bird must have called away. (70)

This passage is especially disturbing, as it augments the narrator's sadness at being unable to please his family with the suffering that the family has endured, having lost another son. Moreover, the narrator's understanding of its condition is astute enough that at one point it asks:

Why did they bring me here to make me

Not quite bad and not quite good,  
 Why, unless They're wicked, do They want, in spite, to take me  
 Back to their wet, wild wood? (70)

The narrator is not only more adult than its age in its phrasing, but also in its emotional capacity to recognize that it does not belong to the human world. It does not cite its parents as bringing it into the world. It cites “they,” an otherworldly being it associates with nature.

The Changeling’s connection with nature suggests it does not belong in the human world—that it is cast out. This idea is reaffirmed repeatedly in the poem, as it mentions being rejected by God: “But the King who sits on your high church steeple/Has nothing to do with us fairy people!” (70). Here, the narrator clearly distinguishes between himself and the “you” of the sane world. It has been rejected by God, and by humanity, which it references again at the end of the poem when it mentions only being able to see the fire from the outside in the cold, saying, “I shall always, always be very cold,/I shall never come back again!” (71). Though the Changeling is human-like in its behavior, it belongs to another world, the world of the insane. It will never be granted access to the human world because of this fact, as the sane do not understand it and it cannot please them. The narrator’s depressing tone as well as its astute understanding of its condition and its family’s resentment of him, compel immense sympathy in readers. We long for the narrator to simply give its family what they want, so that it can stay and be loved. More than that, readers desire to give that love to the narrator itself. However, more than any other Mew poem, “The Changeling” shows the disconnect between the sane and the insane and the rejection and isolation that comes with insanity. Though the line is excessively thin, it is still immensely significant.

## Conclusion

For Woolf and Mew, writing offered a way to explore avenues of insanity that they were unable to in their real lives. While each author approached madness differently and for different purposes in their writings, they inspire similar feelings in readers: sympathy for the mad and a desire for connection between the mad and the sane. Woolf examined scenarios of her madness that she feared in her writing while using her experience to create a unique writing style—the “moment of being” and the free association that gives her work the feeling of tracing a character’s thought process, be them mad or sane. In writing from her own experience of mental breakdown, Woolf instills a sense of dignity in her mad characters, which is recognizable to readers and prompts sympathy for not only Woolf’s characters, but the insane in general. The prose in Woolf’s experimental short stories and *Mrs. Dalloway* bears a striking similarity to her diaries and letters while she was mentally unstable. These commonalities suggest Woolf’s published writings were an effort to capture her moments of madness, and also indicate the thinness of the line between sane and insane for Woolf.

Mew similarly incorporated personal experiences with madness into her writing, purposefully creating characters that invoke sympathy from readers with their innocence and deplorable condition as inhuman. Mew’s mad characters are innocent of their effects on others, or lack the control of their actions to improve their connection to the sane. Readers recognize through these characters that the mad are deserving of sympathy, and that their existence, though separate from the sane, is equally legitimate.

Both Woolf and Mew explore the separation between the existences of the mad and the sane, and the frustration that comes with the inability of the two to connect. While both authors humanize their mad individuals and set them equal to the sane community, it is clear from the two groups' inability to communicate that though the separation between sane and mad may be narrow, it is distinct. The two worlds are different, and readers understand from Woolf and Mew's works that they are each of equal legitimacy. However, the danger of insanity is clear, as it has been forsaken by God and invokes a permanent subhuman status. Thus, though the authors compel sympathy in readers for the mad condition, and instill in readers the desire for the sane and the insane to connect, ultimately readers are left frustrated and dissatisfied. In invoking this desire from readers, Woolf and Mew allow us to experience the frustrations present in mad/sane relationships, as we long for an emotional relief that will never come.

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1976. Print.

LOCAL ADDRESS:  
320 EAST BEAVER AVENUE  
STATE COLLEGE, PA 16801

# CORINNE FIERRO

EMAIL: CVF5109@GMAIL.COM  
PHONE: 412-862-1094

PERMANENT ADDRESS:  
315 KINGSBERRY CIRCLE  
PITTSBURGH, PA 15234

## EDUCATION

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**The Pennsylvania State University - Schreyer Honors College**

**University Park, PA**

**B.A: English** - College of Liberal Arts

*Class of 2015*

**B.A: Print Journalism** - College of Communications

**Literary London Program**

**London, UK**

College of Liberal Arts: **Study Abroad Program**

*Summer 2012*

- Studied modernist avant-garde English literature

## WRITING/EDITING EXPERIENCE

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**Valley Magazine**

**University Park, PA**

*Director of Copy Editing/Writer*

*September 2012-present*

- Head a staff of two peers specifically responsible for editing over 30 web articles weekly
- Analyze final edits on weekly web submissions to ensure content is free of AP style and grammar errors
- Review finalized bi-annual print magazine proofs to correct AP style and grammar errors
- Work collectively with editors, photographers, and writers to produce the best magazine possible
- Write a minimum of one print article per semester, including extensive interviews
- Co-write a weekly cooking column titled "A Dash of Healthy"

**CultureShock Media**

**London, UK**

*Writing Intern*

*Summer 2013*

- Compiled questions for interviews with Arianne Phillips and Helena Bonham Carter
- Evaluated venues available for hire and wrote extensive reviews for the company's Tumblr account
- Communicated with both local and international art galleries and venues
- Created exhibition summaries and interviews for *Sotheby's at Auction* and *Cutler and Gross* magazines

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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**Crivello Carlson S.C.**

**Milwaukee, WI**

*Legal Intern*

*June 2014-July 2014*

- Performed legal research and summarized relevant Supreme Court cases for supervisors
- Transcribed depositions
- Observed courtroom trials
- Tagged important information in legal briefs

## LEADERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT

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**Penn State Learning**

**University Park, PA**

*Coordinator*

*December 2013-present*

- Plan content of weekly staff meetings with three other undergraduate coordinators to ensure that tutoring quality is consistently improving
- Manage the pairing of experienced Tutors with novice Tutors in the Mentorship Program
- Oversee Penn State Learning's World Campus program, which allows tutors to assist students on a global scale using an online program
- Organize tutor class visits and workshops to publicize tutoring availability
- Supervise a large group of peers effectively and respectfully

*Writing Tutor*

*January 2013-present*

- Aid undergraduate and graduate students of all disciplines in improving essays, resumes, and theses
- Work with international and ESL students daily
- Experienced in MLA and APA formatting

**Penn State Education Abroad Office**

*Peer Advisor*

**University Park, PA**

*August 2013-present*

- Guide students in selecting a study abroad program through students' preferences, majors, and finances