

Virginia Woolf's "22 Hyde Park Gate": A narrative analysis of her autobiographical speech on family sexual abuse.

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Background to the study

In 1920, Virginia Woolf (nee Stephen) (VW) (1882-1941), addressed an audience of friends and colleagues, the Bloomsbury Memoir Club, with an autobiographical speech (Wolf, 2002). Presented here is a preliminary narrative analysis of this text, which is part of a larger research project (Androutsopoulou, in preparation). Our research team for this preliminary analysis (six trainee therapists and their course supervisor) were intrigued by the apparently abrupt and unexpected revelation of VW's sexual maltreatment at age 18 by her elder half-brother George Duckworth. The revelation came at the last paragraph of the text, bringing to mind clients making important revelations at the last few minutes of a session.

The issue of revealing traumatic events to others has been given some attention in clinical research interested in criteria for revealing secrets (Vangelisti, Caughlin & Timmerman 2001), and in the work of family-oriented therapists interested in family dynamics and timely disclosures (Miller, 1993; Rober, Walravens, Versteijnen, 2012; Weingarten & Cobb, 1995). However, clients' aware or unaware use of narrative strategies when revealing trauma in therapy is more obscure. In a narrative study, Rennie (1994) demonstrated that clients attempted "a delayed entry into inner disturbance" when talking about difficult issues. In his study, clients first told stories accompanied by more "superficial feelings", and then gradually told stories accompanied by deeper feelings. Using the method of Interpersonal Process Recall, Rennie found that clients were able to recognize the narrative strategies they used. In another narrative study Rober, VanEesbeek, & Elliott (2006) conducted a microanalysis of a first family therapy session. Isolating words relevant to 'violence' and separating episodes built around these words, the researchers found that discussion on domestic violence escalated from the least (eg. war toys) to the most sensitive issues (eg. violence of mother's partner toward the children), leaving out the most sensitive of all, violence of the mother toward her children, discussed in later sessions.

Aim

We wished to explore the narrative processes/strategies in V.W.'s autobiographical storytelling in revealing her abuse to a friendly audience, a group gathered to share memories. We hoped to draw useful ideas for our clinical practice with individuals, families and groups, expecting that these may be also useful for other clinicians working with abused clients.

Method

The autobiographical text was analyzed by first dividing the narrative into five sequential stories and giving them titles (see also Riessman, 2008). Consequently, words referring to emotional expression in general, and to erotic/sexual behavior of any type, were singled out, and the related incidences were marked. Suggestions by Ponterotto (2014) for securing best practices in psychobiographical research were taken into account throughout this preliminary study. Our research group worked following the principals outlined by McLeod (2010) for a team based practitioner research.

Analysis and findings

➤ *Story titles*

- i. Description of house and happenings (pp. 31-32)
- ii. A portrait of George Duckworth (pp. 32-36),
- iii. George's outings with Vanessa (Virginia's sister) (pp. 36-38),
- iv. George's outings with Virginia (pp. 38-42),
- v. Revelation of abuse (p. 42).

At least two narrative strategies were identified

1. Prolepsis.

This was in the form of hints or vague foreshadowing of what would be revealed, coupled with irony and with an element of surprise (the unexpected) (see De Jong, 1996 for similar uses of prolepsis in Homer). Two themes run through the selected examples: *blaming women* and *George being two-faced*:

- a. End of 1st story ("Description of house and happenings")
"My mother believed that all men required an infinity of care. She laid all the **blame**, I feel sure, upon Kitty [a young family friend][“for first promising to marry a man and then breaking it off”](p. 32).
- b. Beginning and Middle of 2nd story ("A portrait of George")
"[...] you also noticed that though he had the **curls of a God** and the **ears of a faun** he had unmistakably the **eyes of a pig**. So strange a compound can seldom have existed. And in the days I speak of, God, faun and pig were all in all alive, **all in opposition**, and in their conflicts producing the most astonishing eruptions" (p. 33).

*“It was usually said that he [George] was **father and mother, sister and brother in one**-and all the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia added with one accord that Heaven had blessed those poor Stephen girls beyond belief [...]”(p.35).*

c. Beginning of 3rd story (“Outings with Vanessa”)

*“I cannot conceal my own opinion that Vanessa was to **blame**; not indeed that she could help herself, but if, I sometimes think, she had been born with one shoulder higher than another, with a limp, with a squint, with a large mole on her left cheek, both our lives would have been changed for the better”(p. 36).*

d. Beginning of 4th story (“Outings with Virginia”)

*“[...] and then [George] burst into a statement which was at once dark and extremely lurid. [...] but if his sisters – if Vanessa refused to go out with him – if he could not bring his friends to the house – in short, it was clear that the chaste, **immaculate** George Duckworth would be forced into the **arms of whores**. Needless to say he did not put it like that; and I could only conjure up in my virgin consciousness, dimly irradiated by having read the “Symposium” with Miss Case, horrible visions of the **vices to which young men were driven whose sisters did not make them happy at home**” (p. 38).[blame]*

e. Last phrase of 5th story (“Revelation”).

*“Yes the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only **father and mother, brother and sister** to those poor Stephen girls; he was their **lover also**” (p. 42).*

2. **Emotional escalation in storytelling**

A. Escalation in the emotional expression of George

a. George’s tears, kisses and embraces addressed to women in the following order:

- his mother,
- his half-sister Vanessa,
- his friend Lady Carnarvon (Elsie),
- his half-sister Virginia

b. George expressed his emotions toward Virginia in the following order:

- praised Virginia
- stroked her hand and told her not to be afraid of meeting Elsie
- was angry with her for being outspoken about the need for emotional expression
- told her it was not her fault that she was outspoken but needed further social education
- told her not to be afraid of him when embracing her in bed

B. Escalation in story incidences related to eroticism/sex

- VW's mother reassuring a young woman of her intact virginity
- Kitty and Leo Maxse's engagement in the Love Corner of the Stephens' summer house as Virginia's "first introduction to the passion of love".
- George threatening to fall into the arms of whores if his sisters did not accompany him to parties
- George secretly kissing Elsie while visiting her with Virginia
- Virginia attending with George and Elsie a theatrical play with a "copulation" scene
- George "flunged himself" on Virginia's bed.

Discussion

Our analysis indicated that VW attempted a delayed entry into the subject of abuse, but this delay was not without strategy. She insinuated early about the revelation to come (prolepsis) using also irony, and second, she planned and presented her story in a graduate manner (escalation) from the least to the most dangerous topics and emotions. These strategies were developed around two identified central themes, running through the selected examples: *blaming women* and *George being two-faced*: The speech was, nevertheless, not revealing of her own emotions; although friendly, probably the audience was not experienced as safe enough or perhaps the emotional impact of the abuse was not realized at the time, no matter how keen VW was in revealing her family life (Zwerdling, 2003).

Even though the therapy setting has obvious differences to a club of friends and colleagues meeting to share personal memories, we believe that some useful conclusions can be drawn in working with victims of family sexual abuse: We propose that therapists pay close attention to stories, and notice possible insinuations combined with an escalation in the emotional and sexual expression/behavior of the characters involved in the story. In order to create an environment of safety, therapists should be encouraging and at the same time respectful of timing, avoiding rushing clients into arriving at the "juicy" part (Zulueta, 2006). Therapists' failure to notice an escalation may discourage traumatized clients from continuing a story which appears to drag on: through her fictional character Septimus, VW talked of the difficulty of PTSD sufferers to put together a non-segmented story of their trauma and be heard by mental health professionals (Meester, 1998). Finally, therapists should be aware that "there is usually more going on than is being told" (Rennie, 1992, p. 242). VW' revelation two decades later of her abuse by her other half-brother Gerald at age 6 is such an example (see Salvo, 1991; Lee, 1997; Terr, 1990).

Future studies could shed more light on the narrative strategies used by clients when revealing trauma in individual and/or group therapy sessions, and on the importance of theme development in telling these stories.

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