

THE HANDKERCHIEF AS A SUGGESTED SYMBOL IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THE WAVES*

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It is a well-known fact that the handkerchief has always been a symbolic element conveying a wide and different interpretation throughout the ages. Its use is most significative in Renaissance literature especially amongst the Italians, and the climax of its importance is traceable in the literature of courtly love, when the apparently innocent young dame unwillingly allows her delicate handkerchief to drop in the presence and sight of the male whom she desires to convert into her lover. He, who in turn is honoured by the opportunity to prove his manliness, stoops before her and tenderly picks it up, considering it as a token of her love, yielding to her plead and consequently understanding the message aroused by that 'accidental' drop.

The appearance of the handkerchief in literature is thus not a mere coincidence and even less an element to be disregarded. It conveys a deep meaning which many times can trigger off the action between sexually complementary characters depending on

whether the handkerchief is shared or has succeeded in establishing a type of contact between both or not.

Nevertheless, this archaic element or traditional symbol has somewhat been disregarded in 20th Century literature in which the handkerchief seems to lack or hardly bear any meaning whatsoever.

My attempt will be that of demonstrating that the handkerchief indeed appears in 20th Century literature, more precisely in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, with such a weight of meaning that it certainly deserves to be regarded as an element worthy of consideration and study.

Before going on to value the handkerchief in literature, it is necessary to have a clear notion of what is precisely a handkerchief. According to Webster's *Dictionary*, the handkerchief is:

1: a piece of cloth usually square and often printed, edged, or embroidered that is used for various usual personal purposes (as the wiping of the nose or eyes) or as a costume accessory.

2: kerchief.

The *World Book Dictionary* adds that it is 'a soft, usually square piece of cloth for wiping the nose, face, eyes, etc., or carried or worn as an ornament.'

The *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* gives further details and states that the form "handkercher" was common in literary use in the 16-17th Centuries and remained the current spoken form, because some time after "handkerchef" was commonly written, around the 1860's.

Joseph T. Shipley explains (1984: 50) the origin of the term (hand + kerchief) as a cloth held in the hand to cover the head and puts forward that the first kerchiefs in England were probably used by King Richard II, who reigned from 1377 (aged ten) to 1439.

'Handkerchief' is a compound word by hand + kerchief, and according to most dictionaries, kerchief is a square piece of cloth worn over the head or around the neck or shoulder, normally by women. (French: couvrir (to cover) + chief (head); Old French: cuevrechief, couvrechef, courchief, cuerchief; Middle English: courchef, kerchef, covercheif).

The aim of this brief display of the etymology of the term 'handkerchief' is to justify that the centerpoint of this study can be, besides the handkerchief as such, any other piece of cloth that can be carried or used to cover the head, such as a towel, turban, scarf, etc., for they are basically handkerchiefs, but not to be carried in the hand.

An interesting point linked to the symbol of the handkerchief is often, if not always, associated to women; that is, it can be regarded primarily as a symbol of femininity.

The *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* explains the meaning of the old saying which is in fact in current use: 'to drop (or throw) the handkerchief'. It refers to young people's games in which he (or she) to whom it is thrown runs after and tries to catch the other; hence, allusively to signify that one may be run after, to invite courtship.

This is probably the main allegorical interpretation of the term when used in poetry and especially prose, which implies that the handkerchief is indeed a symbol for it has a distinct meaning depending on the context in which it is used.

According to Carl G. Jung (1978: 3), what is estimated as a symbol is: "...a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. Implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us.' This precise definition implies that a word, in this case the handkerchief, becomes symbolic when it points to something else than its obvious and immediate meaning,

and not necessarily must it point to the same image, but it can have a vast variety of interpretations. Surprisingly enough, Virginia Woolf handles the term "handkerchief" over twenty-five times throughout *The Waves*, including eight synonyms of the word kerchief and the difference between handkerchief and pocket-handkerchief.

Orlando and *The Voyage Out*, two other literary creations by Virginia Woolf, also reveal the appearance of the handkerchief several times. The appearance of this term is not common in novels, but in Virginia Woolf its use indicates that she wasn't so much obsessed, but rather had a noticeable weakness for the handkerchief, as she demonstrated, consciously or not, in her novels, especially in *The Waves*.

The most traditional interpretation attached to the symbol of the handkerchief is, as previously stated, the one that gives way to courtship; i.e., the handkerchief as a pretext to a promise of love on behalf of the woman,

'It was she who had the supreme right to his attentions. Yet she might drop all the handkerchiefs in her wardrobe (of which she had many scores) upon the ice and Orlando never stooped to pick them up.' (Woolf. 1960: 41).

In this quote the dame proves to behave as a typical young girl in search for love with the uncontrollable urge to lure Orlando into her arms. Despite Orlando's refusal to yield to her plead, her method to attract his attention is exclusively with the handkerchief which is traditional in courtly love.

This young lady seems to be an expert at either making men fall in love with her or flirting around, for she appears to possess a great deal of handkerchiefs which she presumably makes use of.

The following quote also refers to courtly love and the process it conveys, somehow encouraging the young people to

behave as genuine characters of courtly love, for it is only in youth when this can be carried out',

'To see him hand the Muscovite (as she was called), to her sledge, or offer her his hand for the dance or catch the spotted handkerchief which she had let drop, or discharge any other of those manifold duties which the supreme lady exacts and the lover hastens to anticipate was a sight to kindle the dull eyes of age, and to make the quick pulse of youth beat faster.' (Woolf. 1960: 41)

As we can observe, it is the woman who allows the handkerchief to drop hinting an offer of love to the gentleman who picks it up. It would be ridiculous and illogical for the man to try to attract the lady's attention by dropping the handkerchief himself. This implies that the handkerchief can be considered strictly as a feminine symbol; i.e., an element that pertains to the woman and marks her femininity as revealed in the following quote:

'These broad thoroughfares -Picadilly South, Picadilly North, Regent Street and the Haymarket- are sanded paths of victory driven through the jungle. I too, with my little patent-leather shoes, my handkerchief that is but a film of gauze, my reddened lips and my finely pencilled eyebrows, march to victory with the band.' (Woolf. 1980: 131).

The handkerchief is simply another feature of the young woman in search for love, being as important as wearing a new pair of shoes, lips painted in red and having the eyebrows made up.

Even primitive people associate the handkerchief to the female, thus distinguishing her from the male as exemplified by the native women who wore brightly coloured handkerchiefs as a means of rebounding their beauty in *The Voyage Out* (1972: 88).

By means of these last few examples, it is most likely that

Virginia Woolf manifests her feminism, estipulating to the woman what is hers, clearly differenciating both sexes by the aid of elements such as handkerchiefs or lipstick. Whenever the handkerchief appears associated to the female, it bears a meaning of delicacy and tenderness, either forming part of that fine, discreet game of courtly love or simply making proper use of that delicate piece of cloth, the handkerchief, as such. What else can be more gentle and delicate than a handkerchief providing shelter for frail butterflies?

'Lord, let them lay their butterflies on a pocket handkerchief on the und.' (Woolf. 1980: 8).

Many cultures have considered the handkerchief to be a feminine element which implies delicacy and perhaps virginity. Such is the case in the Arabic culture where the young girl wears a handkerchief or veil covering part of her face which, besides bringing out her femininity and tenderness, for she is a young girl, it also bears a religious and sexual meaning, for she is still a virgin, and he who uncovers the veil will be the one whom she wil marry².

The handkerchief can also be associated to the male, but contrary to the idea of delicacy hinted by linking the handkerchief to the female, Virginia Woolf gives a different and sometimes negative meaning to the handkerchief when dealt in terms of masculineness.

Woolf's feminism becomes again manifest, consciously or not, in this case, for it is an element belonging to the female, and it is only she who can put it into good use, whereas when the male interferes with something that does not identify him as such, it is only to make ill use of it or to readjust its genuine meaning to another which is at the same level as the masculine mind, normally bearing sexual connotations.

If we consider the napkin, a type of kerchief, to be similar to a handkerchief, the sexual symbolism in the following quote is easily traceable:

'Bernard moulds his bread into pellets and calls them "people". Neville with his clean and decisive ways has finished. He has rolled his napkin and slipped it through the silver ring.' (Woolf. 1980: 17).

James Joyce (1980: 693) allows Molly Bloom to fuse the idea of a man sleeping with his wife and the napkins as if the latter were forming part of this couple's bed-time love affair:

'...I suppose he used to sleep at the foot of the bed too with his wifes mouth damn this stinking thing anyway wheres this those napkins are ah yes I know I hope the old press doesnt creak ah I knew it would hes sleeping hard had a good time.'

It is in the following quote where sex is more closely related to the handkerchief, which in turn can be a parody of courtly love where the woman, in this case Molly Bloom, offering her handkerchief to the male as a promise of love certainly keeps her word although not without teasing him, which nevertheless forms part of the game of courtship.

'...yes O yes I pulled him off into my handkerchief pretending not to be excited but I opened my legs I wouldnt let him touch me inside my petticoat I had a skirt opening up the side I tortured the life out of him first tickling him I loved rousing...' (Joyce. 1980: 682).

Another possible sexual interpretation can be hinted by Woolf (1980: 69) in which clothing seems to be a primary element by means of which another person can be attracted or even lured to fall into the trap of appearance-reality.

'The black and white figures of unknown men look at me as I lean forward; as I turn aside to look at a picture, they turn too. Their hands go fluttering to their ties. They touch their waistcoats, their pocket-handkerchiefs. They are very young.'

The only apparent interest of these young males is the female who they are observing; they have no interest whatsoever in the picture, but they are rather more concerned with the girl who is looking at the picture or if they are properly dressed or not. The fact of being young is also significant, for it is the typical behaviour of most young men who try to enchant lonely young dames.

There are other times when the handkerchief or the kerchief and its synonyms (towel, napkin, etc.) become a delight for the voyeur who seems to trace or imagine the sight of bare flesh, provoking the sexual instinct to become interested in figuring out what is partly hidden behind that piece of cloth¹,

"As he stood there, the silver trumpets prolonged their note, as if reluctant to leave the lovely sight which their blast had called forth; and Chastity, Purity, and Modesty, inspired, no doubt, by Curiosity, peeped in at the door and threw a garment like a towel at a naked form which, unfortunately, fell short by several inches. Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath." (Woolf. 1960: 127).

But it is only with the male figure where this sexual interpretation is observable, perhaps because Virginia Woolf intended to describe the mind of the male with the aid of a female element, which is the handkerchief.

On the whole, it helps to give the reader an idea of how Woolf depicts the virility of the male almost always in sexual terms.

Also associated to the notion of sex is the stained handkerchief, either with blood or other organic substances:

"I hate your greasy handkerchiefs -you will stain your copy of *Don Juan* ." (Woolf. 1980: 59).

The unison of the stained handkerchief and *Don Juan* can give way to a wide interpretation very much connected to sexuality.

Virginia Woolf seems to disapprove very much of unclean handkerchiefs indicating that the person who possesses a dirty handkerchief is as hateful and ugly as the handkerchief itself. In this case the handkerchief becomes a negative symbol representing a person or a negative feature of the person concerned:

"I feel your disapproval, I feel your force. I become with you, an untidy, an impulsive human being whose bandanna handkerchief is for ever stained with the grease of crumpets." (Woolf. 1980:56)

"Yet Byron never made tea as you do, who fill the pot so that when you put the lid on the tea pot spills over. There is a brown pool on the table - it is running among your books and papers. Now you mop it up, clumsily, with your pocket handkerchief. You then stuff your handkerchief back into your pocket - that is not Byron; that is you; that is so essentially you that if I think of you in twenty years' time, when we are both famous, gouty and intolerable, it will be by that scene..." (Woolf. 1980: 58-59).

The fact of the character stating that she will always remember the person whom she is with by simply imagining a handkerchief mopping up spilt tea assures the reader that the handkerchief is indeed a symbol in Virginia Woolf.

A handkerchief stained especially with blood reveals the cruelty and sarcasm of its owner, contrary to the meaning hinted by the spotless and delicate piece of cloth, granting yet another interpretation to the handkerchief which in this case would refer to anything dealing with destruction, pain or agony:

"But they leave butterflies trembling with their wings pinched off; they throw dirty pocket-handkerchiefs clotted with blood screwed up into corners. They make little boys sob in dark passages." (Woolf. 1980: 32).

James Joyce (1980: 10-11) also mentions a stained and creased handkerchief which coincides with Virginia Woolf's, depicting the filth and rottenness suggested by a handkerchief of the same features, brought down even lower by Joyce, naming it 'nosserag':

'He came over to the gunrestand, thrusting a hand into Stephen's upper pocket, said:

- Lend us a loan of your nosserag to wipe my razor.

Stephen suffered him to pull out and hold up on show by its corner a dirty crumpled handkerchief.

Buck Mulligan wiped the razorblade neatly. Then, gazing over the handkerchief, he said:

- The bard's nosserag. A new art colour for our Irish poets: snotgreen. You can almost taste it, can't you?'

The message in these last few examples is that Virginia Woolf unmistakably applies a negative meaning to a creased or stained handkerchief. A handkerchief is unclean only because the person who owns it is of a similar personality, and in very much the same way, a crumpled handkerchief can represent a crumpled or torn heart. This implies that Woolf establishes a direct association between the handkerchief and the personality of the character to whom it belongs. On the other hand, as we have observed so far, a clean, colourful or uncreased handkerchief symbolizes positive things such as shelter, tenderness, decorative uses, femininity and, most important of all, love.

The following quotes portray well enough that a screwed or crumpled handkerchief implies that something unpleasant has happened to the character concerned. The handkerchief thus becomes a symbol of rage, agony, pain or anything that provokes an affliction to the heart of the character.

'I saw her kiss him. I saw them, Jinny and Louis, kissing. Now I will wrap my agony inside my pocket handkerchief. It shall be screwed tight into a ball.' (Woolf. 1980: 9).

'Then she comes to the dip; she thinks she is unseen; she begins to run with her fists clenched in front of her. Her nails meet the ball of her pocket-handkerchief. (...) Susan has spread her anguish out. Her pocket-handkerchief is laid on the roots of the beech trees and she sobs, sitting crumpled where she has fallen.' (Woolf. 1980: 10).

'There is also a blue scroll of needle-work embroidered by some old girl. If I do not purse my lips, if I do not screw my handkerchief, I shall cry.' (Woolf. 1980: 22)

'That I observed even in the midst of my anguish, when, twisting her pocket-handkerchief, Susan cried: "I love; I hate". (Woolf. 1980: 168).

After observing these examples, the handkerchief may be regarded as a useful and perhaps necessary element, for it is the only means by which the affected characters can ease their hearts and minds without collapsing, consequently becoming an aid of support to withstand the tremendous pressure they seem to be going through.

We can estimate that the main goal of the handkerchief as synonym of agony in Virginia Woolf would be the will to be free from agony, an urge to escape the affliction caused by any depressing situation, and the only means by which a character can be freed from their torture seems to be by transmitting their feelings to the handkerchief and twisting it up into a ball or simply by clutching it with might. In this sense, the handkerchief may be understood as a symbol of release or liberation, speaking in terms used by Henderson (1978: 156).

This symbol of relief is not strictly applied to the handkerchief, but it can also be extended to anything susceptible of

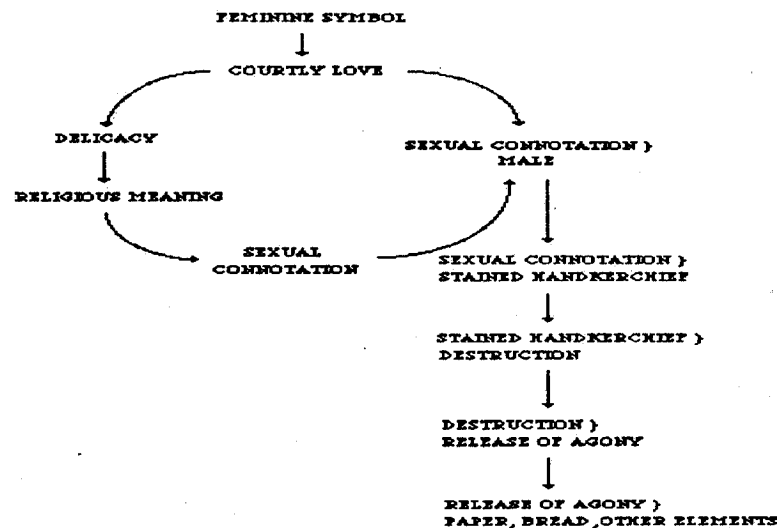
screwing tight into a ball. The following quotes reveal that Virginia Woolf's characters many times feel the need to relieve their anguish or release their tension by clenching a piece of paper or simply fiddling with bread, for instance:

'How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into the waste-paper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life.' (Woolf. 1980: 138).

'So each night I tear off the old day from the calendar, and screw it up tight into a ball.' (Woolf. 1980: 27).

This is just another of the many interpretations attached to the handkerchief rebounding its importance and how its symbolic meaning extends to other apparently meaningless elements.

It would be necessary to draw a chart to summarize and explain the possible interpretations of the handkerchief in Virginia Woolf. The chart would be as follows:



This chart has the aim to demonstrate that the handkerchief is indeed a symbol, which at this stage can be considered as such, susceptible of having a wide range of meanings according to the different contexts in which it appears, therefore becoming an important and recurrent feature in Virginia Woolf, probably more significative or at least more frequent than her other well-known symbols such as seven sided flowers, the flow of water or other elements of Mother Nature.

It is not a mere coincidence that Virginia Woolf turns many times to the handkerchief to express the feelings of her characters at a certain moment (hence the recurrent appearance of the term throughout her novels), but a lost tradition of using the handkerchief as a symbol that not only Virginia Woolf, but other modernist writers, such as James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, have retaken into account after becoming aware of the vast and yet precise range of meaning which this symbol provides.

The initial suggestion of regarding the handkerchief as a symbol in Virginia Woolf is at this stage justified, for the handkerchief has proved to be an interesting element which can provide a clearer or at least another way of approaching the contents of Woolf's novels, thus giving way to a wider scope of understanding.

The identification of the handkerchief as a symbol in the literary production of Virginia Woolf, more precisely in *The Waves*, is perhaps a difficult and daring task to carry out, but it is at this very last point where a further research becomes all the more worthwhile.

NOTES

1 Frank Kermode and John Hollander (1972: 481) comment on "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot who also mentions the handkerchief possibly hinting courtly love or rather the loss of love games played by young couples amidst a party or perhaps a picnic due to the presence of elements such as empty bottles, sandwich papers, cardboard boxes or cigarette ends.

The river, which is a symbol of life in Eliot, no longer transports all these objects, no longer does it supply happiness nor it is a witness of youngsters playing joyfully by its banks, for this river is in the waste land and is no longer alive. The nymphs of this land are, as Eliot very well states, departed and have left the land to perish.

'The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are
departed.' (T.S. Eliot. 1976: 58).

T.S. Eliot provokes an impression with the handkerchief implying that it can also convey other meanings, many times expressing sadness. This is the use of the handkerchief when waving good-bye to those who are departing perhaps never to return. It is a well-known scene that which represents travellers on a ship, for instance, leaving abroad to a distant country, and friends and relatives bidding farewell with their handkerchiefs sadly from land. The handkerchief is therefore a symbol for sorrow, necessary in situations like the one described, perhaps to have the handkerchief close at hand to wipe away unavoidable tears of sadness.

2 The handkerchief has always had a religious connotation, in fact the London Gazette, Nº 6056/1, in 1722 expressed that "The Santo Sudario (or Holy Handkerchief) is to be exposed" (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*) referring to the Holy Shroud in which Christ was enveloped.

James Hall (1987: 245) gives yet another religious meaning to the handkerchief or piece of cloth, in this case portraying the face of Christ, which symbolizes Veronica.

In the celebration of Mass, it is customary for the priest to cover the Chalice with a handkerchief after having offered Holy Communion to all the parishioners perhaps to maintain and protect the Blessed Host for further consecration.

Jung (1978: 4) provides a possible explanation for the use of symbols (be it the handkerchief or other symbols) in religion:

'Because there are numerous things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend. This is one reason why all religions employ symbolic language or images.'

3 I again seek the aid of Carl Jung (1978: 38) who expresses that there are many motifs or single symbols that are typical and often occur. He goes on explaining that:

'Among such motifs are falling, flying, being persecuted by dangerous animals or hostile men, being insufficiently or absurdly clothed in public places, being in a hurry or lost in a milling crowd, fighting with useless weapons or being wholly defenseless, running hard yet getting nowhere.'

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