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An Aesthetics of Illness and Minor Ailments
in Virginia Woolf's Works

「ヴァージニア・ウルフ作品における病と不調の美学」

文学研究科
英米文学専攻

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Summary of Thesis

**Title of Thesis: An Aesthetics of Illness and Minor Ailments in
Virginia Woolf's Works**

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In this thesis, I investigate Virginia Woolf's depictions of illness and ailments, which played an important part in shaping Woolf's writing style. This thesis aims to suggest that illnesses and ailments in her texts represent her feminist expressions shifting throughout her career in relation to the socio-political context of the time during the 1910s to the 1940s. To achieve this, I demonstrate how illnesses/ailments in Woolf's texts are represented and how they problematise the relationships between sufferers and healthy others, body and mind, and the language and gender roles which are constructed within inherently male-dominant discourses.

My reading basically starts from a re-evaluation of Woolf's 1926 essay, "On Being Ill". In the essay, Woolf challenges the literary insensitivity to the aesthetic value of common ailments. She suggests that symptoms of ailments such as slight fever, sciatica and sleeplessness should be centralised as well as the conventional themes like love and hate, good and bad people in prose writing. In displacing the dominant themes with such ailments, Woolf attempts to embody the ignored sufferers'

experience in her writing. Such illnesses do appear in her prose.

By using the words “aesthetics of illness and ailments” which appear in the title of my thesis, I mean to convey a similar, basic stance to that of Kimberly Engdahl Coates, who argues in “Exposing the “Nerves of Language”: Virginia Woolf, Charles Mauron, and the Affinity Between Aesthetics and Illness” (2002) that Woolf in “On Being Ill” attempts to focus on physical reaction aroused in human experience – opposing Roger Fry and Clive Bell, who separate physical sensations rooted in human life from an aesthetic response in order to define their art theory. In this light, I focus on Woolf’s writing of illnesses and ailments in daily life, which highlights women’s obscure daily experience of the body and distinguishes her aesthetic theory from that of male modernists.

In Chapter I, I analyse *The Voyage Out* (1915). The novel describes an experience of the protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, at a British colonial resort in South America. It is in Woolf’s depiction of Rachel’s experience of illness that the novel demonstrates Woolf’s prototypical aesthetic sense of illness. The more Rachel suffers from fever and loses concern for people and the outside world, the more she becomes conscious of her own body, which is presented symbolically as floating at the bottom of the sea, like a mermaid. The representation of the protagonist’s tropical fever introduces several discourses of the female body and art which are closely connected with modernist

aesthetics, patriarchy and imperialism. Along with those contexts, Woolf's protagonist's tropical fever can be read as an expression of the author's feminist concern about the female body and creativity.

In Chapter II, I examine *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). In this novel, she attempts to convey different sensations and perceptions through two main characters' symptoms of illnesses: Clarissa Dalloway's influenza and Septimus Smith's shell shock. Woolf's writing of different types of illnesses demonstrates how her aesthetic views shifted in relation to the effects of war and pandemics. In addition, Woolf oddly includes in the text a female character going through menopause, as well as two major illnesses, which plays an important role in subverting the binary opposition of physical and mental illnesses. By so doing, Woolf reimagines the female (feminised) body juxtaposed with weakness as an aesthetic resource of creativity.

In Chapter III, I explore the meaning of the female body to women's creativity in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Woolf highlights the body of a female painter, Lily Briscoe, who struggles to complete her painting. In addition to the female painter, Woolf describes the veiled life of a working class elderly woman, Mrs McNab, whose weariness marks her worn-out body as a working woman. In comparing these two female characters, we realise that the language Woolf uses to describe the working-class character's labour resonates with that which she uses to describe

the creative experiences of the female painter. The novel presents the merging point in the text, where the two characters' bodily experiences are echoed.

In Chapter IV, I examine *The Years* (1937). This chapter shows how differently she describes the experiences of three female characters – Mrs Pargiter, Sara Pargiter and Peggy Pargiter – in bad physical condition by reflecting their different values, as they come from different generations. In depicting Mrs Pargiter's Bright's disease, Woolf emphasises her ruined body and the devolving relationship between mother and daughter in the Victorian family. With the disabled body of Sara Pargiter, Woolf dramatises the young woman's experience in her bedroom compared with other healthy people's enjoyment of the mating dance by describing Sara's bodily sense. Peggy Pargiter's sleeplessness due to her job emphasises her different viewpoint from that of her elderly relatives, which is critical of people looking away from the legacy of World War I and from the shadow of World War II. Embodying each character's experience of being in an unhealthy state, Woolf historicises the disregarded problem of the middle-class female body from 1880 to the 1930s.

In Chapter V, I analyse Woolf's posthumously published novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). A central character Isa Oliver plays an important part to expand the private experiences to a shared experience of the community of a rural England. Isa is metaphorically represented as a person with toothache, who

seeks a cure for pain in books of poetry, biography and science on the Oliver family's bookshelf. However, as her eyes are attracted to a report in the newspaper about a girl who was raped in London, her toothache overlaps with this girl's pain, which creates a potential locus of solidarity among women suffering in the text. Isa's sense of pain also responds to human suffering from fear, agony and violence of World War II weaving Woolf's feminist aesthetic language.

In Woolf's writing of illnesses and ailments from the 1910s to the 1940s, the tone of death gradually fades. While the isolation of those suffering is emphasised in the early writing, the experience of illness in the middle and later phases is presented not only with the significance of isolation but also with its relation to other (un)healthy people's ordinary lives. The characters in poor condition are also described in terms of their relation to society. Woolf's choice of minor ailments to express the aesthetic experience of the characters demonstrates her political and aesthetic concerns about the inseparable relationship between art(ists) and society. In her aesthetics of illness and minor ailments, she attempts to reveal the possibility of being ill and producing a different means of expression from the dominant male-centred discourse without losing access to society.

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