At the end, we may once more sum up Virginia Woolf’s novels in a bird’s-eye-view. One will certainly agree that her novels had indeed freed “Life” from the superficial “narrative” of her ancestors. One will also agree with what H. Porter Abbott holds as regards the entire literary productions of Mrs. Woolf:

Looking back, what one sees is the trace left by a constantly moving point of furious energy, a track continually breaking off, changing direction, yet leaving along the way whorls of formal brilliance, many of them momentary eddies (like Mrs Chavasse), but some thrown off into a separate life of their own as essays, stories, and on rare occasion extraordinary novels.¹
Conjoined to these appraisals on one side of the coin are the charges leveled against her of her deliberate complexity which may be justified. Reading and understanding Virginia Woolf’s fiction is indeed demanding on the less sophisticated reader. They may even have to exert immense labour while attempting to classify and systematize her complex texts. It’s not only asking too much, but rather its putting the readers into a position – a position in which they could endure to see for themselves the true working of inner mind and of the true experience, perceptions and moods.

The life and reality that Mrs. Woolf strives to paint is a truism particularly at this time when varied changes have changed the outlook on life and society. Surely she felt the traditional dogmas as a fetter, an encumbrance; something ridiculous that limited her freedom to the position of a slave. Throughout her literary career, she struggled to throw off these Victorian dogmas to be a master of her own in future. She gives up the ‘ladder – like narration motion’ in her novels. Rather she moves from transparent meaning to opaque complexity and from the delineation of character to the exploration of the psyche. And if one comes in search of ‘plot’ in her novel, one will find it as barren as a desert. Instead what one gets in its place is an aroma of human life, sense of living, of the continuation of life, of the rhythm of experiences and perceptions in the
whole composition of life. Her fictions are one of the offshoots in the long time history of fiction. She proves not only an inheritor but also a contributor to the progress of fiction in the British literary history; opening a new horizon with an incipient interest in a fresh lease of life.

Mrs. Woolf’s fictional work is indeed a mirror to the human soul and mind. One will find that her earnest endeavours have been to affect “real” emotional experiences rather than aesthetic experience. One almost finds her transcending the limit to reach the individual’s basic psychological structures in all their richness and complexity. She makes explicit the progress of human thoughts, desires, intention and memories in her novels. These are evidences of her stand against the Edwardians, who followed the conventional form. Their materials of art, to her were no longer real, but transformed materials of life. Moreover, our motivated actions and reactions, doings and sufferings – all appeared as “unmotivated” in their works.

Contrary to them, Mrs. Woolf draws her material from the realm of consciousness – for instance the emotional shocks, the experience of passion, and the crisis of human destiny in general, all the experiences which go to make up the conscious life of man, and her own feelings for life in particular. She
assimilates these human experiences to the poetic level and renders them for the reader with greater clarity and depth of the inner human insight. In a nutshell her works are interpretation and illumination of the contents of consciousness; of the ineluctable experiences of human life.

After going through her novels, it is observable that the failure of her first two novels *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* was an outcome of the discordant combination of her vision which was ‘new’ with the basic principles of the novel which was ‘old’. Though each novel’s plot is based on a love story, it is quite apparent that her interest lies not on the width and variety of the human comedy, nor on the idiosyncrasies of human character. Rather it was the deep and simple human experiences like love, happiness, beauty, loneliness and death that most interest her. From her later novels we gather her interest which lies somewhere hitherto ignored – in those aspects of consciousness which she felt contained the truth of human experience. From *Jacob’s Room* onwards, Mrs. Woolf displays that the Edwardian novelists and herself are poles apart in their conception of the novel, its form and its function.

Mrs. Woolf, by the time she wrote *Jacob’s Room* had certainly settled the question of form and design appropriate to her vision of life and reality. The old
conventions were to be cast off completely with a trust in her own instincts, for she believed that the essence of life and reality was marred by the old practices of storytelling. Consequently she switches on to her own style which handled the “stream of consciousness”, that is, where events are remembered not in chronological order but as free association brings them to mind. In her later novels *Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, The Waves, The Years* and *Between the Acts* Mrs. Woolf continued to analyse consciousness as atoms. She fully traced and displayed all the traces of the mind’s passage through the world. However at the end, the infinitely incoherent and discordant fragments of perceptions and moods evolve symmetrically into a beauty that seems quite natural as has never been before. And for the most part in her endeavour to come nearer to life, in her attempt to recreate the incoherent and disorganized impressions through her narration and picturing of human character she undeliberately probes into the darker psychological reality beneath the sparkling details.

Considering her craft as a writer, Mrs. Woolf proves herself innovative and quite different from the general mores and values of her time. Since time immemorial, writers have walked on the circular footpaths laid down by their ancestors. Conforming to the popular political, religious, philosophical, psychological as well as sexual attitudes has been a criterion for their success in
their literary career. Regardless of the hypocrisies and evasions, these writers cultivated the same crop sowed by their ancestors. Mrs. Woolf may not be a true psychological novelist in the traditional sense dispensing faithfully with all the requirements of one. But she comes very close to one. She opted for the stream-of-consciousness technique with its accent on durational flux. She shared commonality of purpose with the other stream of consciousness novelists in her realization of the original or the intuitive identification with the object (reality). In fact, it won’t be an exaggeration to give her the credit of bringing up the stream-of-consciousness novel to its pinnacle; which for her was the best way of perceiving and analyzing reality. Her novels are indeed ‘a direct quotation of the mind’; unmistakably revealing the emphatic particulars of a subject’s present experience.

Doubtless, great changes were observed in the field of psychology in the early twentieth century. It was now possible to watch each other in the shade of the new light. And so by degrees, the silence of the human mind and soul is broken; we begin to hear rustlings in the undergrowth. The mind itself speaks out through soliloquies and interior monologues. Virginia Woolf seems to hold out that if one wishes to seize the essence of things one should seek for it in unobserved corner up a dark entry; in short, it is a journey from the outer to the
inner. This she brings out with an astonishing combination with her philosophy on life. Indeed, no writing seems to flow more exactly into the very folds and creases of the individual mind, to express its changing moods, to answer its lightest whim and impulse, and yet with a perfect, precise and composed whole. Mrs. Woolf will obviously remain a model of the moderns; singularly of her age, in her interest in silence rather than in speech. No realist could have been more brilliantly successful in rendering the impression of the moment.

Thus in Mrs. Woolf, we are never allowed to stray our minds in unnecessary lanes. Rather we are led into a complex meaning fully and completely. She may not be an ideal painter of mental scenery, yet she successfully leads her readers to grope among the curious depths of human psychology and track down the reason of things. To take up as an instance, we are at the first hand knowledge of the particular fate befalling Septimus Warren Smith. In the course of reading *Mrs Dalloway*, we follow minutely the worsening of Septimus’s condition to his ultimate suicide. One almost finds oneself communing with Septimus nonetheless it is Mrs. Woolf’s credit. With all her innovative outlook and sublimity of sensibility, Mrs. Woolf remains an extremely rare novelist attempting to realize the unrealizable, penetrating into the durational layers of experience which is in a state of flux. Indeed Mrs. Woolf
made the best use of the spoils her gifts brought in and that very well controlled her genius in the act of creation. We may even assert that the freedom and seemingly informality of Mrs. Woolf’s writing is not intended to give a sense of complexity or obscurity in her novels, but rather serves as a sign of her confidence as an author in controlling her art. Hence as Christopher C Dahl assert: “The informality and freedom are products of careful art, not inattention”.

The late nineteenth century towering figures of memory research in an era of dynamic psychology offered pathways for the exploration of memory by fiction writers in the twentieth century. In this fertile context of ongoing scientific exploration, the writings of Mrs. Woolf become illuminating test cases of the working of the mind and the understanding of memory process. The whole of the novel To the Lighthouse is a trip itself to the mind of the lead characters; the third part is a trip down memory lanes, recalling and recording events of ten years of life. Mrs. Woolf not only depicts the interior world of the characters – but one crucial thing more, she relates both the past and the present. Henceforth, the method of dramatizing the picturing of somebody’s experience that failed to touch its limit in James amounted to further extension in the hands of Virginia Woolf. She had with skillful hands revealed and related
finer threads of feelings, stronger and more obscure imaginations. And the track that Mrs. Wools kept was not the circular path laid down by her ancestors, rather a road not taken covered with ‘dust and the desert’.5

In her novels *Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, The Waves* and *Jacob’s Room* to some degree, Mrs. Woolf illuminates the consciousness from its roots to the surface. In these works, it is the mind that entices us and the adventures of mind that concern us. Of course, there are events happening in these books, for instance, Septimus’s suicide, dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, Clarissa’s evening party in *Mrs Dalloway* and so on. However the difference is that these events are seen through the screen of the mind. We are shown how contradiction prevails deep down in the mind of the characters, how beneath the crude surface, all is chaos and complication. And further how these contradictions and anomalies make man at once divine and bestial. We continue to live along a thread of observation which is always going in and out of this mind and that mind; gather information from different social levels, which make us now feel with a lady (a fashionable hostess in London), now with a painter (trying to finish her memory picture), now with a shell-shock victim (on the verge of death) that bring us in touch with different experiences. Mrs. Woolf successfully brings before the reader, every piece of evidence upon which
any state of mind is founded. Hence her characters are fleeting and evasive, perhaps because they are so much more than the current of emotional force. Her characters are created through what people think and what is thought about them, through the knowledge and the thoughts of the character themselves. We come to understand them slowly and laboriously, but with the whole of our minds.

At this juncture, it might be pointed out that describing a person who experiences things is difficult for the very fact that to describe any human being is almost an impossible task. However, Mrs. Woolf comes very near to the essence of our being by including in her narrative – the character’s inner self and experiences both past and present. In drawing her characters, she takes every perception into account, she registers “every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit” so that “no perception comes amiss” hence creating a clear picture of the characters’ inner world. In Mrs Dalloway Mrs. Woolf reveals the inner and profound private selves of the characters. Through their inner world, she shows the fluidity of human personality rather than the fixity of characters’ solid existence. Further in The Waves, Mrs. Woolf renders the states of being of the six characters. The state of change in the mental world of the characters is represented in a series of stylized soliloquies leaving no space for
description of outer world. Indeed: “The Waves has given a final deathnail to the traditional story, and characterization. It is not the mere death of the story and hero but the burial of the waste and superfluity of conventional narrative style”.  

Mrs. Woolf’s revolting nature is revealed in her essay “The Leaning Tower”, she mentions an advice that an eminent Victorian once gave to walkers:

Whenever you see a board up with “Trespassers will be prosecuted”, trespass at once.

No doubt she took the advice to find her own way for herself.

Finally, the effect of all these broodings, reflections and analyzing of mind is always to produce the elusiveness of life embodied with an atmosphere of doubt, of questioning, of pain, of isolation, perhaps of despair. At the same time, to send home the idea that personality is ‘discontinuous’ consisting of discrete moments of experience, differing from instant to instant. One more interesting aspect of Mrs. Woolf’s narrative approach is that her strategy is an outcome of her due emphasis on open experiences, rather than the closed ethical experiences in the course of life, achieved through coherence of
narration. One will always observe the flux of consciousness finishing in the experience of incompleteness. Her narrative embodying the rhythm of human experience and the selective moments provides a structure with which the quality of living is perceived. While the very inconclusiveness and shapelessness of life is expressed by her characters. Nothing is concluded. Hence, continuity and fluidity becomes an inherent feature of her human personality and human experience rather than boundary or definition.

As a result, to follow Mrs. Woolf, many readers are left in the lurch, at times remote and inaccessible. If Mrs. Woolf distresses these readers, the blame rests partly with the reader who has not acquired her perspective. It will help to remember that different writers might have lived through the same years, seeing the same work and being covered in textbooks by the same stretch of literary history. But they differ greatly in their perspectives. Hence, the first formidable task for a reader is to master Mrs. Woolf’s perspectives for a clear understanding of Mrs. Woolf’s fiction; for the knowledge of how the novelist orders her world of course lends a helping hand. Among all her essays “Modern fiction” will be greatly helpful for readers to go through as it informs and embodies Mrs. Woolf’s own artistic aspirations and imaginative recreations.
For a reader, it may help them to know that:

If, for Eliot, the author’s “personality” was “but a particular medium”, for Virginia Woolf it was the principal. In the name of “the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul,” Eliot justified an “impersonal theory of the poetry”. In the name of the integrity of the artist, Virginia Woolf called for a personal rendering of the world.⁹

Also, it is important to know that Mrs. Woolf’s emphasis on the inner world of sense experience, feeling and thought is not designed to disparage the normal everyday reality but to enhance it. The very realm of consciousness she presents does not replace the reality we naively believe in, but is shown to constitute this reality. The Edwardian novelists whom Mrs. Woolf censured as writers who outfitted life like “Bond Street tailors”¹⁰ represented a different realm of reality; failing in their judgment to capture what is truly real. On going through Mrs. Woolf’s novels, one almost feels called out in the actual life, freeing us to take delight in things in themselves. We see different minds at work, making patterns by their power to bring out relations in things. She has indeed given us so definite a world though without material boundaries. If closely observed, her
whole universe is steeped in the light of intelligence. The commonest object such as dressing table, typewriter etc., loses its simplicity, its solidity and becomes a part of life and transparent. The commonest action such as opening the window, going for a walk, or eating dinner excites a whole series of thoughts, memories, sensations, ideas, intuitions in the threshold of mind. And after reading her novels, say *Mrs Dalloway*, one is expected not to put it down with a weakened sense of reality but to rise with a keener sense of reality of our ordinary objects and our ordinary things with their richness and depth.

Not everyone has loved Mrs. Woolf, of course. Some still doubt Mrs. Woolf’s significance. The merits of her novels are still a subject of unabatable dispute. Opinions remain divided – there are people who claim her to be “a great artist” like Professor Bernard Blackstone who believes “her world will survive as the crystal survives under the crushing rock-masses”. While at the other end of the pole, critics like F.R. Leavis do not get tired condemning Mrs. Woolf. Hugh Kenner even goes to the extreme to set Mrs. Woolf in a dead-end tradition as heir to Henry James with “no descendants”. Besides there are the less sophisticated readers, irritated and bewildered by her later novels. At this, it may be pointed out that two critics at the same table at the same moment
can always pronounce completely different opinions about the same book. Nevertheless, Mrs. Woolf’s books are also not classed as first-rate.

On analyzing why Mrs. Woolf’s works are not entered as first-rate, the first factor that comes up is that of Time. However, it should be kept in mind that time is never the real test of greatness; for it may raise or depress or again raise a work according to its whims. And each reader reads differently with the insights and the blindness of his own generation. Rather it is the universality of appeal that credits a work for its grand success. As for Mrs. Woolf, the very age that produced her was an age of irresponsibility and then of apprehension; this age and its qualities were ingrained in her works. But the blame lies on the age, in which her work was grounded. And her novels are never lacking in the interest of setting man against the background of vast experiences without diminishing man in the process. Nor is she lacking in any of the qualities that brands a writer first-rate. She has the intensity of vision, ability to penetrate creatively the fabric of experience and to fertilise it, so as to translate the concept directly into reality. So, if one asks what keeps her from being first-rate? The answer is she possesses all qualities, but sadly it is less sustained compared to other great writers. Yet, for some of her achievements, particularly her technical virtuosities, she has commanded the admiration from lovers of
literature and the English tongue: for the purity of her imagination, ability to express the incommunicable thought, her delicacy and strength in style, to illuminate common experience, her unique and valuable contribution to technique. But still an admirer of Mrs. Woolf may find consolation from the fact that if her works couldn’t be classed under the best; it is yet among the good of all times.

Mrs. Woolf herself projects through Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* her thoughts that it does not matter in the least whether the canvas is ultimately destroyed or rolled up in some dusty attic:

There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.13
As an artist Virginia Woolf comes much like her own creation of Lily Briscoe; the fate of Lily’s artistic representation is the possible fate of Mrs. Woolf’s own. But no one can deny that Mrs. Woolf is a serious writer and that her novels with their generic capacity for “inside views” have less brilliance on the surface and more depth than those of others. Her steps though treaded on a road not taken were so sure, her choice nearly right and her imagination, even if deliberately willed have been so imaginative, that in the end she makes a great achievement of an artist extraordinary.
NOTES


