

Sam See, "The Comedy of Nature: Darwinian Feminism in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*." *Modernism/Modernity* 17.3 (2010): 639-667

In 'The Comedy of Nature,' Sam See delights in phrases such as "Woolf's campy cows," and "Woolf's concentrated camp" whilst discussing degeneration and atavism in relation to Hitler's Nazi regime (658). It is a clever engagement with ideas See describes in *Between the Acts* as "simultaneously humorous and disturbing" (643). While *Between the Acts* may get away with being a "strange concatenation of humour and horror" (642), one wonders if it is insensitive of the critic to have fun with campy concentration, while considering ideas of concentration camps.

Of course Woolf's rejection of the human tendency to "sanitise death" (652) and her rejection of Hitler's extreme sanitisation, genocide, forces the characters in *Between the Acts* and, with them, the reader, to face the uncomfortable. From defecation to "f—ing" to death, See asserts, Woolf *forces* discomfort because these are biological truths (652). However, the examples See cites are rare occasions in Woolf's writing, which is often characterised as aristocratic. Indeed, Woolf was disgusted by the realism of *Ulysses*, and wrote the following in her diary: "An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking, & ultimately nauseating". Again, later in her diary, she wrote: "The pages reeled with indecency. I put it in the drawer of the inlaid cabinet." While See references Woolf's few forays into uncomfortable, gritty writing, he admits she redacts a word in her diary so it is written as "p—p". Woolf cannot bear to write directly about defecation: the forcing of biological truth seems as discomfiting to the author as to her readers.

One of the cornerstones of the article is See's analysis of 'camp', both in Woolf's work and in the critical practice of the article. See argues initially that 'camp' is a category which "resists definition" (644), which may explain why it is so freely and flexibly used throughout his analysis of *Between The Acts*. The idea of camp is applied broadly, and can seem difficult to pin down in its resistance of definition. See rejects Susan Sontag's statement that "Nothing in nature can be campy" by effectively arguing that it is nature itself in *Between The Acts* that is 'camp'. Later, See argues that "to be good with bad aesthetics [is] a definition of camp itself" (645) which adds to the complex understanding (or challenge to understand) this particular consideration of camp. The free use of 'camp' in "The Comedy of Nature" could be considered a strength, because See argues for a similar complexity of camp in *Between The Acts*, but this aspect of the article may unsettle the critic who looks for solidity.

Adding a further layer to this complexity, See argues that Woolf considers her use of 'camp' as feminist, and that this can be defined as a Darwinian feminism because Woolf saw Darwin's theories as misogynist. See explains that Woolf "characteristically described humour as women's best weapon against such forces" (645) as war and fascism, and she therefore "camps sexual selection" in *Between The Acts* by using parody (645). This parody then acts to subvert Hitler's misuse of Darwinian theory. If camp, with its subversive degeneration, is "simultaneously humorous and disturbing," (645) does Woolf's female weapon of humour work in the same way? See convincingly argues for Woolf's use of uncomfortable humour in

Between The Acts. Intimate detail is animal, or natural, which then (by some definitions) can be considered atavistic or 'camp'. The feminine is traditionally considered closer to nature. One is tempted to begin drawing charts to clarify the interrelationship of ideas. Can camp, or queer, or homosexual, *be* feminine? Can camp be natural in its unnaturalness? A final reading introduces the idea of failure. La Trobe, a main character in *Between The Acts*, is "a camp failure" (657), directing "a play whose camp failure yields the audience's public intimacy" (656) and thus a successful pageant.

Though See's arguments for mutability and subversion in his examination of 'camp' allow for flexibility, relating these to Darwinism and failure is a harder sell. Because *Between The Acts* is a subversive text, then the play within the novel, and the campy character directing the play, are successful failures. But in Darwinian terms, failure does not propagate. And in biological terms, it can be argued, queerness cannot propagate. See certainly tackles a complex succession of ideas in "The Comedy of Nature" with a great deal of success. However, the very mutability of the ideas discussed means that the arguments are, like camp itself, not always entirely transparent.

Kelley Swain