

Review Article

Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction": A Paradigm Shift in Literary Criticism

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A B S T R A C T

Virginia Woolf, a prominent figure in the modernist movement, was renowned for her avant-garde writing style and feminist perspectives. Woolf's writing style explores the intricacies of human consciousness and the impermanence of time. Her writing frequently conveys how subjective and transient perception is, mirroring the fractured realities of the modern world. As a significant member of the Bloomsbury Group, an association of 20th century thinkers and artists, Woolf experimented with newer ideas that questioned conventional norm and embraced a freer, more liberated understanding. Her works, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Orlando* (1928), demonstrate her skill of capturing the subtleties of identity, the passage of time, and the complexities of interpersonal relationships. In addition to her literary works, Woolf also authored a large number of literary articles and donned the role of a literary critic of her time. In her essay, "Modern Fiction" (first published in 1919), Woolf presents a radical critique of the traditional novel, calling for a shift towards a more experimental and thoughtful form of storytelling. She advocates for a more eloquent and subjective style of writing that conveys the complexity of the human condition in its raw state. Woolf, in her work, delineates the significance of portraying people's inner thoughts and consciousness. This essay explores these key arguments put forth by Woolf in "Modern Fiction" (1919) and examines their impact on the literary world.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Time, Modernism, Modern Fiction, Psychology

Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is a twentieth century writer who holds a significant position in the realm of modernist literature. Her literary contributions played a significant role in shaping modernist literary understanding and influencing its development. Alongside her creative pursuits, Woolf demonstrated prowess as a critic and essayist. Her critical writings on subjects such as nature of fiction, women's roles in literature and the dynamic between literature and society are eloquently expressed in works, like "The Common Reader" (1925) and "A Room of One's Own" (1929). In her

work, "A Room of One's Own" (1929) she professes about the challenges women authors face due to social and economic factors. She emphasized the importance of women having independence and a dedicated physical space for writing.

Woolf explored modernist fiction's ability to depict the complex and evolving character of human experience in her critical essays. In order to portray the complexity of contemporary life and the human psyche, she understood that literary originality was necessary. Her essay, "Modern Fiction" (1919) in particular advocates the idea of radical departure from the 19th Century literary norms.¹

Departure from the Slavish Traditional Conventions

Woolf begins her essay by critiquing fiction at that time pointing out its limitations and predictable style. Woolf defines “modern fiction” as a break from this conventional narrative style of writing. She demands a move away from chronological, linear storylines and toward a deeper investigation of the innermost feelings and thoughts of the characters. Woolf exposes her contemporaries namely H.G. Wells (1866-1946), Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), and John Galsworthy (1867-1933) who remained loyal, to narrative frameworks, unwilling to embrace the radical possibilities presented by modern socio-cultural environment. She argues that the traditional novel’s linear framework is inadequate to convey the intricacy and fragmentation of human reality. She is of the view:

If we tried to formulate our meaning in one word we should say that these three writers are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul.... If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one-word materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.^{2,3}

According to her, the story should be more adaptable, allowing for several points of view, a non-linear chronology, and a stronger focus on the present moment. By abandoning traditional narrative structures, Woolf is able to delve into the nature of time and explore how human experiences intersect. She encourages a revival of creativity, in the arts while criticizing the stagnation she sees in literature (Banfield 18). She contends that in order to genuinely engage readers in a fresh and creative way, writers must reject clichés and overused norms.

The Examination of Psychology and Ordinary Moments

Woolf’s theory of “modern fiction” emphasizes the significance of ordinary moments and delving into the psychology of characters. Woolf believed that modern novels should explore the workings of their characters’ minds (Goldman 80). She attacked Victorian novelists for their shallow characterizations and propensity to center their works on plot and extraneous details. She quotes:

In the case of Mr. Wells it falls notably wide of the mark. And yet even with him it indicates to our thinking the fatal alloy in his genius, the great clod of clay that has got itself mixed up with the purity of his inspiration. But Mr. Bennett is perhaps the worst culprit of the three, inasmuch as he

is by far the best workman. He can make a book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in. There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet--if life should refuse to live there? That is a risk which the creator of *The Old Wives’ Tale*, George Cannon, Edwin Clayhanger, and hosts of other figures, may well claim to have surmounted. His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for? More and more they seem to us, deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns, to spend their time in some softly padded first-class railway carriage, pressing bells and buttons innumerable; and the destiny to which they travel so luxuriously becomes more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton.²

Woolf supported a more thorough examination of the characters’ consciousness. The early 20th century witnessed advancements in fields of investigation including psychology. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was one of the thinkers who developed an interest in understanding the complexities of human psychology. This progress in psychology also had an impact on literature with writers, like Woolf using novels as a medium to delve into the workings of emotions and thoughts of modern men/world. (Banfield 13). Woolf’s own works, such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), demonstrate her dedication to capturing the interior ideas, goals, and perspectives of her characters. She employed narrative approaches that allowed her to go inside their thoughts and show the intricate workings of the human mind.

According to Woolf, literature should not focus on events and grand narratives; it should also uncover profound truths in “ordinary” moments. Woolf aimed to draw attention to the small things in life in order to emphasize how complex and varied human experience is. In her words:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being “like this”. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions--trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there;⁴

Woolf’s artistic pursuit exemplifies this focus, on occurrences where she often portrays the beauty and significance hidden within insignificant moments. In the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925 the story unfolds within a day primarily focusing on the thoughts and perceptions of its main characters, Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith.

Influence and Appreciation for Russian Novelists

Woolf believes that the influence of Russian novelists, on the development of fiction is noteworthy. Writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) played a role in shaping the way the art of storytelling evolved. Their innovative narrative techniques and exploration of character psychology had an impact on writers across the globe changing the way stories were told. A distinctive characteristic of modern fiction is the use of stream of consciousness narratives, which portray characters' inner thoughts and emotions in a fluid and often fragmented manner. This narrative style finds its roots in literature particularly exemplified by Russian authors like Dostoevsky. In his work, *Notes from Underground* (1864), Dostoevsky delves into the intricacies of human thought processes.⁵

In her essay, "Modern Fiction" (1919), Woolf argues character development should take precedence over storyline and that contemporary literature should concentrate on characters' interior thoughts and consciousness. This is consistent with Russian character development tradition that emphasizes psychological depth and complexity.

The conclusions of the Russian mind, thus comprehensive and compassionate, are inevitably, perhaps, of the utmost sadness. More accurately indeed we might speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind. It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair. They are right perhaps; unquestionably they see further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision.⁶

Russian novelists' experimentation with narrative forms is consistent with Woolf's demand in "modern fiction" for a departure from traditional and linear narrative frameworks.

"Proper Stuff of Fiction"

"The proper stuff of fiction" does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss. And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.⁶

Woolf provides a perceptive examination of the modernist literary movement in relation to what she views as "the proper stuff of fiction" (Woolf 6). She challenges conventional methods of storytelling that prevailed during her time urging authors to embrace a creative and experimental approach. This means pushing the boundaries

of narrative techniques and questioning established norms (Fisherman 330). Woolf particularly admires the stream of consciousness style of storytelling which involves delving into a characters' thoughts, feelings and perceptions. She advocates for capturing the flow of a characters' consciousness in time than simply recounting external actions and events. By providing readers with access to a characters' thoughts and emotions this approach creates a more intimate and captivating reading experience. According to Woolf, it is crucial to prioritize the growth of a character's self, over their connections or actions. She encourages an exploration of character development and transformation focusing on struggles, introspection and self-discovery that shape these characters.⁷⁻⁹

She believes that literature should portray the complexity of the mind and the unpredictable and often conflicting nature of emotions and thoughts. According to her, modern literature should capture the intricacies of existence by delving into the inner lives of its characters with nuance. The emphasis on personal subjectivity and perception is another key component of the "proper stuff of fiction." Woolf emphasizes the idea that characters' interpretations of events, things, and other people should be thoroughly examined because reality is a subjective concept (Goldman 278). This method draws attention to how experiences are relative and varied.

The role of a Writer

Woolf encourages authors to delve into the complexities of cognition and emotions and study their characters' psychology and consciousness and experiment with narrative techniques in order to capture the essence of life. She advocates for an organic flowing style that reflects the ever changing subjective reality. She says:

The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn.

Woolf encourages authors to take an innovative approach to storytelling emphasizing the importance of capturing the intricacies and unpredictability of the modern world. This is essentially her plea for authors to adopt a more free-spirited, inventive, and independent approach to modern literature and to escape the metaphorical shackles of old narrative patterns.^{10,13}

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf revolutionized 20th century literature with her innovative ideas about fiction and the process

of literary production. Even in the contemporary times, readers and writers still find relevance in her perspectives on the importance of experiences the rejection of linear storytelling, the impact of gender and society, the examination of “ordinary” moments and, the significance of language and writing style.

By delving into the emotional and psychological complexities of characters, addressing pressing social issues, and responding to the significant cultural, political and social changes of that century, English novels, in the 20th century achieved something remarkable by capturing the mindset and condition of that era. These novels remain sources for understanding experiences during this transformative period in history. Woolf’s work paved the way for a diverse literary canon, by challenging established norms and inspiring a new generation of writers to explore creative possibilities.

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