

What Was Modernism?

Lecture 7: Virginia Woolf

The Novels of Virginia Woolf:

The Voyage Out (1915)
Night and Day (1919)
Jacob's Room (1922)
Mrs Dalloway (1925)
To the Lighthouse (1927)
Orlando: A Biography (1928)
The Waves (1931)
The Years (1937)
Between the Acts (posthumously published 1941)

+ *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick. London: Triad Grafton, 1987

+ Essays:

Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown (1924)
The Common Reader (1925, *Second Series* 1932)
A Room of One's Own (1929), *Three Guineas* (1938)

Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" (1919)

So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the [realistic] story is not only labour thrown away but labour misplaced [...] 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 [...] But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

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 [...] 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. [...] We are not merely pleading for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. [...] Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it?—"I prefer men to cauliflowers"—was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished—how strange it was!—a few sayings like this about cabbages.

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.

For having lived in Westminster—how many years now? over twenty, — one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

For it was the middle of June. The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven—over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace. [...]

Speech and Thought in Narrative

Basic possibilities:

1) narrative report of speech and thought acts

(> telling/diegetic discourse; summary)

- She spoke at length about her future prospects.
- She sat down and thought long and hard about the future.

2) quotation of characters' speech and thought

(> showing/mimetic discourse; scenic presentation)

- [She said,] "At present I'm making plans for my future. It seems to me that ..."
- [She thought,] "What will I do in the future? Oh my god, it is all so hopeless ..."

Additional possibility:

indirect modes of (re-)presentation

- [She said that] at that moment she was making plans for her future. It seemed to her that ...
- [She asked herself] what would she do in the future? Oh god, it was all so hopeless ...

Markers of indirect speech and thought:

- tense shift (present tense > past tense, present perfect > past perfect, future tense > conditional ...)
- subject shift (1st person > third person), shifting referential frame of place (here > there ...), time (now > then ...) and relation (this > that ...)

DIEGETIC DISCOURSE



MIMETIC DISCOURSE

(telling)

(showing)

narrator's voice

'dual voice'

character's voice

Report – tagged i.d. – free i.d. – tagged d.d. – free d.d.

tagged = including introductory verb/clause
free = without introductory verb/clause
i.d. = indirect discourse
d.d. = direct discourse

Characters in *Mrs Dalloway*:

- Clarissa Dalloway and Richard Dalloway
Peter Walsh
Sally Seton (Lady Rossiter)
- Elizabeth and Miss Kilman
- Septimus Warren Smith and Lucrezia Warren Smith
Sir William Bradshaw

Plot in *Mrs Dalloway*:

- Wednesday, 13th June, 1923
- passage of time marked by the strokes of Big Ben

Integrative Strategies in *Mrs Dalloway*:

- mediation through authorial narrator in occasional passages of pure narrative voice (i.e. unaffected by character perspectives) introducing and commenting upon characters and scenes
- an intricate web of leitmotifs and linking images (flowers, vegetables, bird, salmon, age/death, 'Fear no more', tree of life, green/yellow, pocket knife, 'a shilling into the Serpentine', 'That is all', 'There she was')

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

'The Window' – 'Time Passes' – 'The Lighthouse'
(one day – 10 years – one day)

Mrs and Mr Ramsay
8 children
Lily Briscoe

planning but
failing to go to
the lighthouse/
to paint the
Ramsays' house



the trip to the lighthouse

the painting

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (ending)

"He must have reached it," said Lily Briscoe aloud, feeling suddenly completely tired out. For the Lighthouse had become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze, and the effort of looking at it and the effort of thinking of him landing there, which both

seemed to be one and the same effort, had stretched her body and mind to the utmost. Ah, but she was relieved. Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last.

"He has landed," she said aloud. "It is finished." Then, surging up, puffing slightly, old Mr Carmichael stood beside her, looking like an old pagan god, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident (it was only a French novel) in his hand. He stood by her on the edge of the lawn, swaying a little in his bulk and said, shading his eyes with his hand: "They will have landed," and she felt that she had been right. They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything. He stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly and compassionately, their final destiny. Now he has crowned the occasion, she thought, when his hand slowly fell, as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth.

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. 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.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1931)

- figural narrative situation → interior monologue
- six (upper) middle class characters (Bernard, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, Jinny and Susan) verbalize their ongoing perceptions and reflections at different stages of their development from childhood to adulthood
- the 9 stages of development are indicated by symbolic interludes in italics describing the parts of a day and year on the coast
- the interior monologues bring out the distinct personalities and experiences of the characters, but images of the sea, the tides and the waves run through the novel as a whole

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously. Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres like the smoky fire that roars from a bonfire. Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue. The surface of the sea slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling until the dark stripes were almost rubbed out. Slowly the arm that held the lamp raised it higher and then higher until a broad flame became visible; an arc of fire burnt on the rim of the horizon, and all round it the sea blazed gold.

The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down. The sun sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like the tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue finger-print of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window. The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial. The birds sang their blank melody outside.

'I see a ring,' said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.'

'I see a slab of pale yellow,' said Susan, 'spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.'

'I hear a sound,' said Rhoda, 'cheep, chirp; cheep chirp; going up and down.'

'I see a globe,' said Neville, 'hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.'

'I see a crimson tassel,' said Jinny, 'twisted with gold threads.'

'I hear something stamping,' said Louis. 'A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.'

'Look at the spider's web on the corner of the balcony,' said Bernard. 'It has beads of water on it, drops of white light.'

'The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears,' said Susan.

'A shadow falls on the path,' said Louis, 'like an elbow bent.'

'Islands of light are swimming on the grass,' said Rhoda. 'They have fallen through the trees.'

'The birds' eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves,' said Neville.

'The stalks are covered with harsh, short hairs,' said Jinny, 'and drops of water have stuck to them.' [...]

- while the six characters are caught up in the self-conscious tensions between their desire for self-definition and a stable identity on the one hand and dissolution, changeability and multiplicity on the other a seventh character (Percival) is clearly admired by all of them
- Percival embodies the traditional personality which is determined by social inclusion and complete conformity with existing class and gender conventions
- in contrast to the other characters, Percival is only seen from the outside: he has no identity problems, but models himself on traditional patterns of individuality and public roles (sportsmanship, imperial service, heroism)
- in spite of the fact that Percival is generally admired by the other characters to whom he provides a nostalgic sense of order and stability, the novel clearly presents this identity pattern as obsolete and ridiculous
- in the last of the 9 phases Bernard separates himself from the other characters as a narrator telling the story of the group a second time, but his attempt at a comprehensive retrospect is undermined by self-consciousness
- the only stability is reached in the structure of the novel as a work of art, not in narrative alone
- the structure of the work, however, is staged as organically linked to the dynamic and ever-changing existence of the world at large (analogies and differences between birds and characters, the waves)
- subjective perspectives (interior monologues) and objective existence (interludes) are reconciled through authorial strategies the validity of which is only partly undermined through the case of Bernard

► synthesis and integration as the dominant strategies in Virginia Woolf's fiction

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