

Introduction to World Literature
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Solid Objects

Hello and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course entitled Introduction to World Literature. Today we are looking at a short story "Solid Objects" written by Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf is one of the foremost writer of mediaeval period, she is a British writer and this is one short story which has received very lucrative attention back to her other works, especially her novels such as (0:39) the lighthouse, which has a towering status as far as literate name is concerned. So compared to that her short stories were largely ignored, so I take this opportunity to present here this short story "Solid objects" which I also considered as one of the finest works of the modernist period which also conveys to us the hollowness that was felt during the modernist period especially in the interval years during the First World War and right after that.

So this story is set in London in 1920s, this is the post-war period after the First World War and it also signals the changes which had been happening in the society. Though there is no direct critic of anything of the society or the other contemporary politics that we can find in this short story, there is a way in which through just two characters and with very minimal action, very minimal set of events happening we find Woolf very efficiently capturing the essence of modernism. As the story opens, we find two upper caste males and the beach; I will read out the 1st segment here.

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SOLID OBJECTS

The only thing that moved upon the vast semicircle of the beach was one small black spot. As it came nearer to the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat, it became apparent from a certain tenuity in its blackness that this spot possessed four legs; and moment by moment it became more unmistakable that it was composed of the persons of two young men. Even thus in outline against the sand there was an unmistakable vitality in them; an indescribable vigour in the approach and withdrawal of the bodies, slight though it was, which proclaimed some violent argument issuing from the tiny mouths of the little round heads. This was corroborated on closer view by the repeated lunging of a walking-stick on the right-hand side. "You mean to tell me . . . You actually believe . . ." thus the walking-stick on the right-hand side next the waves seemed to be asserting as it cut long straight stripes upon the sand.

"Politics be damned!" issued clearly from the body on the left-hand side, and, as these words were uttered, the mouths, noses, chins, little



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So there we find to upper-class males in conversation then you will get to know that it is slightly about politics, and critical way in which the story begins that is a zooming in which happens, it is very graphic very visual. And there is a way in which this story zooms in to the 2 individuals and their lives and their integrities that become part of the story. The setting at the outset tells us hardly anything about the story; we get to know nothing at all about the characters for about the action or about how the story is going to go forward.


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"Politics be damned!" issued clearly from the body on the left-hand side, and, as these words were uttered, the mouths, noses, chins, little moustaches, tweed caps, rough boots, shooting coats, and check stockings of the two speakers became clearer and clearer; the smoke of their pipes went up into the air; nothing was so solid, so living, so hard, red, hirsute and virile as these two bodies for miles and miles of sea and sandhill.

They flung themselves down by the six ribs and spine of the black pilchard boat. You know how the body seems to shake itself free from an argument, and to apologize for a mood of exaltation; flinging itself down and expressing in the looseness of its attitude a readiness to take up with something new—whatever it may be that comes next to hand. So Charles,



And in the next segment "Politics be damned" issue it clearly from the body on left-hand side, and as these words were uttered, the mouths, noses, chains, little moustache, tweet caps, rough boots, shooting coats and check stockings of the 2 speakers become clearer and clearer, the smoke of their pipes went up into the air, nothing was so solid so living so hard, red, hirsute and virile as these 2 bodies for miles and miles of sea and sand hill. Just to find the

title solid object we find this short story right at the outset focusing on the material, focusing on the solid elements and focusing on the materiality of the body as well as the things that are surrounded over them.

It also talks about to people as 2 bodies, the body on the left-hand side and the body on the right-hand side and about the details such as the tiny mouths on the roundhead or the mouths, noses and chins, so that there is a particularity the story begins to focus and we get a hang of that then a ration in that sense. So if you are familiar with this short story which is highly readable and a very short story, you will get to know that there are 2 major characters here; John and Charles, and John is currently the member of the Parliament and he is also a candidate for an important office, an important party position, and Charles is a very close (()) (5:02) also one of his greatest friends.

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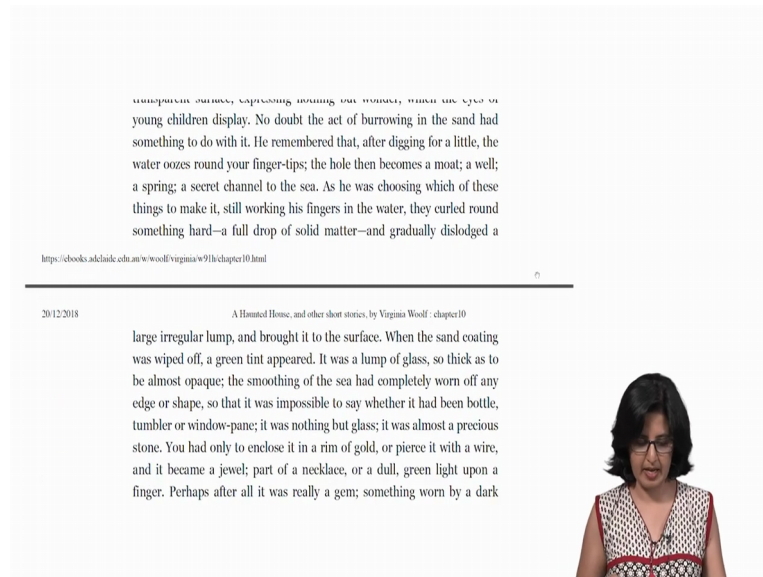
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They flung themselves down by the six ribs and spine of the black pilchard boat. You know how the body seems to shake itself free from an argument, and to apologize for a mood of exaltation; flinging itself down and expressing in the looseness of its attitude a readiness to take up with something new—whatever it may be that comes next to hand. So Charles, whose stick had been slashing the beach for half a mile or so, began skimming flat pieces of slate over the water; and John, who had exclaimed "Politics be damned!" began burrowing his fingers down, down, into the sand. As his hand went further and further beyond the wrist, so that he had to hitch his sleeve a little higher, his eyes lost their intensity, or rather the background of thought and experience which gives an inscrutable depth to the eyes of grown people disappeared, leaving only the clear transparent surface, expressing nothing but wonder, which the eyes of young children display. No doubt the act of burrowing in the sand had something to do with it. He remembered that, after digging for a little, the



And the story takes a turn when John, the one who has set a scale greater heights in this political career, he suddenly discovers the successive passion, his passion for solid objects, let us see how that is described here. So this is how Charles and Johns are introduced to us, so Charles whose stick had been slashing the beach for half a mile or so, began skimming flat pieces of straight over the water, and John who had exclaimed "Politics be damed" began borrowing his fingers down, down into the sand. As his hand went further and further beyond the wrist, so that he had to hitch his sleeve or little higher, his eyes lost their intensity, rather the background of thought and experience which gives an inscrutable depth to the eyes of grown people disappeared, leaving only the clear transparent surface, expressing nothing but wonder, which the eyes of young children display.

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unspacious spaces, expressing nothing but himself, which the eyes of young children display. No doubt the act of burrowing in the sand had something to do with it. He remembered that, after digging for a little, the water oozes round your finger-tips; the hole then becomes a moat; a well; a spring; a secret channel to the sea. As he was choosing which of these things to make it, still working his fingers in the water, they curled round something hard—a full drop of solid matter—and gradually dislodged a

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91h/chapter10.html>

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large irregular lump, and brought it to the surface. When the sand coating was wiped off, a green tint appeared. It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone. You had only to enclose it in a rim of gold, or pierce it with a wire, and it became a jewel; part of a necklace, or a dull, green light upon a finger. Perhaps after all it was really a gem; something worn by a dark



No doubt the act of burrowing in the sand had something to do with it, he remembered that after digging for a little the water oozes around your fingertips, the hole then becomes a moat, well, a spring, a secret channel to the sea. MC was choosing which of these things to make it still working his finger in the water, they curled round something hard, a full drop of solid matter and gradually dislodge a large irregular lump and brought it to the surface. When the sand coating was wiped off, a green tint appeared. It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque, the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or windowpane. It was nothing but glass, it was almost a precious stone, you only had to enclose it in a rim of gold and or pierce it with a wire and become a jewel, part of a necklace or a dull green light upon a finger thus it goes.

So we find here that nothing dramatic happens but the twist that has surfaced is very-very dramatic. John who is taking a stroll by the beachside along with Charles, the 2 friends are clearly discussing politics and suddenly find John saying “damned the politics” and he gets obsessed with the solid object that he finds, he is taking for it and he is finding it and he finds it very-very precious. Before we continue with the discussion of the story, I want you to think about what modernism was and how that changes the way in which this literature began to be understood and how representations began to be changed. We all are familiar with the historical setting and many things which happen as a in the backdrop of modernism, all was running up to modernism from the late 19th century onwards.

The Industrial Revolution being one of the important key events, and then revolutions of 1848, 1848 as we all know it was called year of revolutions across Europe, not just in Britain it was called as the year of revolution across Europe. And there was also a significant First World War in the early 20th century, so all of these events, these political historical events, they had a significant role to play in the shaping of the modernism. We shall not go into details of it but I just want to leave you with this thought in the dominik head, one of the historian and one of the literary critics of the modern period, he had argued that short story encapsulates the essence of Literary Modernism because there is a way in which the short story manages to capture the nature of 20th century episodic experience.

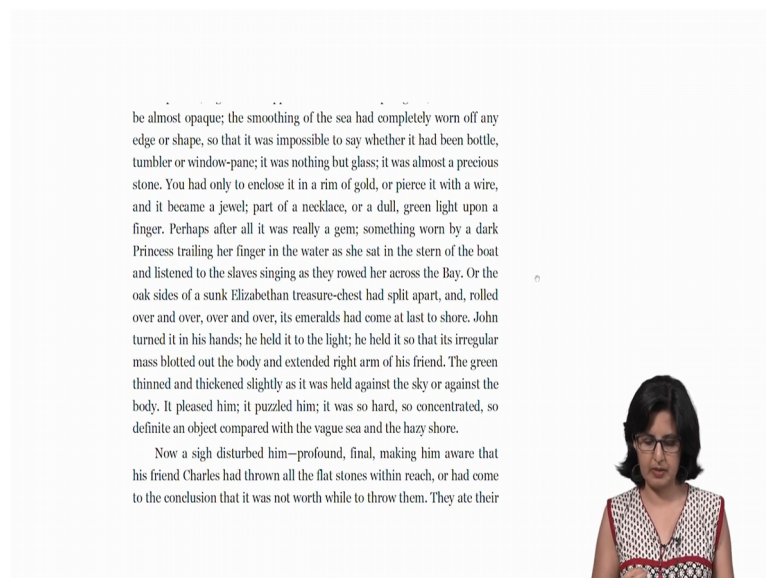
So you are what we get to is not the larger picture, in this short story what we get to know is the episodic nature and the episodic details about the many events which can also be considered as the replication or the aftermath of larger bigger events which were happening in history, in the society and at the National and international level. So we find Woolf focusing on ordinary solid items here and we find this description throughout the short story. And if you look far away in which we can summarise this short story, we will also get to know that there is hardly any story here.

It is about a man John, one who has an inspiring political career, one who has a promising political career, he is allowing solid object, he is allowing an obsessive relation with solid objects to take over his passion, to take his career and eventually take over his rational self. So what makes this story enduring, what makes this story representative one of the modernist period is the way in which it talks. It represents child's incomprehension of this (())(10:20) that is happening. So this story is about Charles as much as it is about John, John is the one who discovered this insane passion for objects and he is going after then in obsessive way.

And we find Charles completely unable to comprehend the nature of this passion, and we find him in spite of trying we really have to reach out, we find him left with utter dismay and he has no other option but to just leave John at the end of it. So this is about that modernist crisis about the inability to communicate and also about the inability to comprehend things in spite of trying, despite trying to reach out and there is this elusive nature which we find this in this short story throughout, much as we try to find rational for John's obsession. Even if you read out very-very close reading of the story, it is very hard to get a background to it, it is very hard to get a flashback which will tell us clearly why this had happened.

And this difference of the meaning making process and this elusive nature of the meaning making process also remains very-very centre to most modernism writings, most literary modernist writings as we know. I find the description of this object that John gets hold of very very compelling, and look at the way in which Woolf is also trying to tell us how this object has the capacity to transform itself into something valuable the moment it becomes enclosed in a rim of gold or the moment it is pierced with a wire, how the value addition becomes a very external thing, how it is possible to say that there is no inherent value but it is all about the value which is being attributed to the object which is in hand. And coming down we also see him getting obsessively attached to the object that he has mount.

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John turned it in his hands, he held it to the light, he held it so that it is irregular mass blotted out the body and extended right arm of his friend. The green thinned and thickened slightly as it was held against the sky or against the body. It pleased him, it puzzled him, was so hard, so concentrated, so definite in object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore. And this is important, it is a different kind of realism also that Woolf is trying to perhaps attempt over here. She is trying to compare the solidity of this object, the hardness of the object, the concrete nature of the object against the abstract things which one sees around here being a vague and the hazy shore.

Of course those are also material means, but the way in which Woolf is looking at objects, the way in which Woolf is trying to approach the solidity of object is very modernist in nature. And we do not find her romanticising the beach, romanticising the sea or the sunset in anyway. On the other hand, what is being romanticised here is that solid object which begins

to acquire value only when it is looked at, only when it is seen through John's eyes otherwise, it is just one (13:53) other thing, one of the many forgettable things which we see around and that materiality is something Woolf also draws your attention to.

It also draws your attention to some of the controversial, at some of the hard getting things that modernist art itself had been trying to do, the art exhibit title the Fountain, the inverted, the urinal getting converted into an object of art that itself is one of the most interesting cases in point. And we also realise that there is a way in which Woolf also tries some words the ways in which materiality or value becomes significant or insignificant in very relative terms.

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mass blotted out the body and extended right arm of his friend. The green thinned and thickened slightly as it was held against the sky or against the body. It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore.

Now a sigh disturbed him—profound, final, making him aware that his friend Charles had thrown all the flat stones within reach, or had come to the conclusion that it was not worth while to throw them. They ate their sandwiches side by side. When they had done, and were shaking themselves and rising to their feet, John took the lump of glass and looked at it in silence. Charles looked at it too. But he saw immediately that it was not flat, and filling his pipe he said with the energy that dismisses a foolish strain of thought:

“To return to what I was saying—”

He did not see, or if he had seen would hardly have noticed, that John, after looking at the lump for a moment, as if in hesitation, slipped it inside his pocket. That impulse, too, may have been the impulse which leads a child to pick up one pebble on a path strewn with them, promising it a life of warmth and security upon the nursery mantelpiece, delighting in the



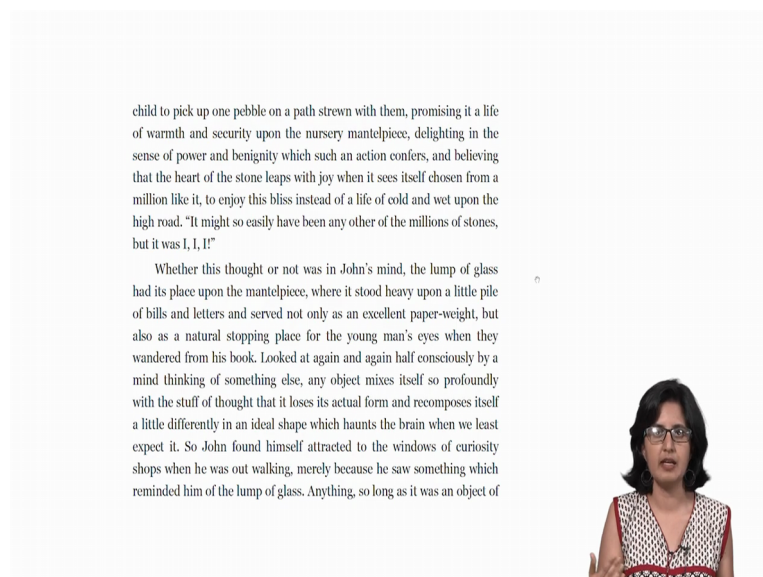
And as soon as this obsession takes so, the resolves John finds himself almost losing himself in this object, how it pleased him, it puzzled him and how that becomes the reality for him than anything what is happening around him. We find that the communication lines also begin to get cut of between John and Charles. They ate their sandwiches side-by-side. When they had done and were shaking themselves than rising to their feet, John took the lump of glass and looked at in silence. Charles looked at it too, but he saw immediately that it was not flat, and filling his pipe he said with energy that dismisses a foolish strain of thought. “To return to what I was saying...” So this is significant, Charles also sees it but he returns to what he was saying.

And here we find that this is what differentiates Charles from John, this is that line which can be drawn between John and Charles, both of them see it and it is accessible to both of them, and both of them they managed to touch it, but the way they respond to the solidity of that

material word, the way they respond to the object that has come to their hand that is what makes it an tiredly different, then look at what John does now. He did not see or if he had seen would hardly have noticed that John after looking at the lump for a moment, as if in hesitation, slipped it inside his pocket.

And we find that this story is taking an interesting turn now, there was hardly any significant action over here if you survey this from the beginning. We notice that there is hardly anything which is happening here except for John's transformation which is gradual in a certain way and it is also very very certain. And we find that even before he realises it, John finds himself obsessively attracted to this object and he flips it within his pocket, it becomes a part of him that impulse to may have been the impulse which leads the child to pick up one table on the path thrown with him promising it a life of warmth and security upon the nursery mantel piece, delighting in the sense of power and benignity with such an action confers and believing that the heart of the stone leaps with joy when it sees itself chosen from a million like it to enjoy this bliss instead of life of gold and wet upon the high road.

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child to pick up one pebble on a path strewn with them, promising it a life of warmth and security upon the nursery mantelpiece, delighting in the sense of power and benignity which such an action confers, and believing that the heart of the stone leaps with joy when it sees itself chosen from a million like it, to enjoy this bliss instead of a life of cold and wet upon the high road. "It might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones, but it was I, I, I!"

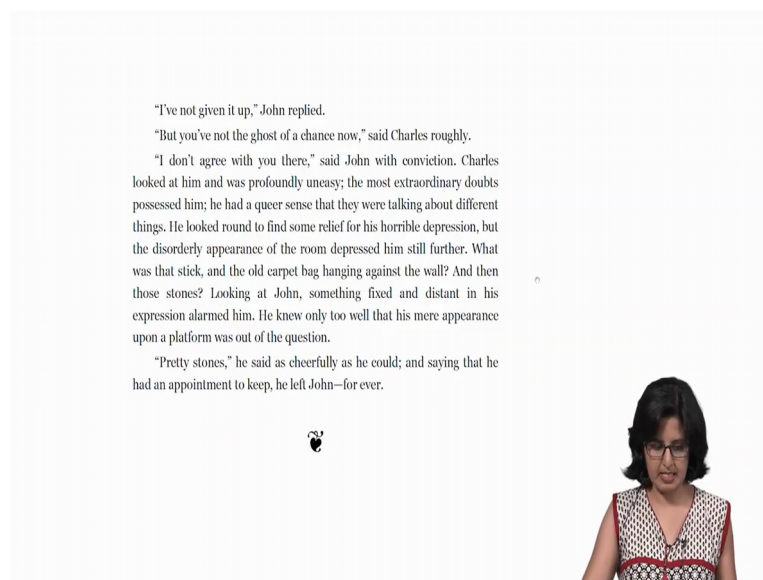
Whether this thought or not was in John's mind, the lump of glass had its place upon the mantelpiece, where it stood heavy upon a little pile of bills and letters and served not only as an excellent paper-weight, but also as a natural stopping place for the young man's eyes when they wandered from his book. Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it. So John found himself attracted to the windows of curiosity shops when he was out walking, merely because he saw something which reminded him of the lump of glass. Anything, so long as it was an object of

"I might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones, but it was I, I, I." The image of the child coming in cannot be ignored over here at all, and 2nd time if you notice that this image is being brought into the story. John feels the excitement of a child and if you think about it in the way James joy, he is not a significant modernist writer the way he begins his important work, the portrait of the artist is a young man. It begins with baby talk, there is a way in which childhood or the language of the child or the behaviour of the child is used as something to retain originality to get back to some kind of authenticity which no longer was

that during the modernist period. And we find that same attempt perhaps in a different way being made over here.

We find that John is being compared, John's excitement and John's sincerity, John's attachment to this object is very much compared to that of a child. And in the same way that piece of glass that stone also gets some life and this personification is significant as well, it might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones but it was I, I, I. So the value attributed to this object which is otherwise nothing, it also increases exponentially as the story progresses. As we read on we find John very gradually but in a very steady way descending into complete insanity and he reaches a point where even Charles is unable to rescue him, and his office space we find it getting completely transformed into something like a madman studio and we realise the case beyond redemption by the time the story ends.

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We can skip a few details and come to the end of the story where we find Charles making an attempt to finally reach out Charles making an attempt to reach out to John one more timer. "What was the truth of it John?" asked Charles suddenly, turning and facing him. "What made you give it up like that all in a second?" So now we get to know that the beginning of the story is actually making a sense, John just gave it up all in a second and we do not know what had happened prior to that moment, but there is that moment that comes into his life where he holds this object and he realises that nothing else is worth pursuing, not a promising political career, not a promising office in his party.

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As his eyes passed from one to another, the determination to possess objects that even surpassed these tormented the young man. He devoted himself more and more resolutely to the search. If he had not been consumed by ambition and convinced that one day some newly-discovered rubbish heap would reward him, the disappointments he had suffered, let alone the fatigue and derision, would have made him give up the pursuit. Provided with a bag and a long stick fitted with an adaptable hook, he ransacked all deposits of earth; raked beneath matted tangles of scrub; searched all alleys and spaces between walls where he had learned to expect to find objects of this kind thrown away. As his standard became higher and his taste more severe the disappointments were innumerable, but always some gleam of hope, some piece of china or glass curiously marked or broken lured him on. Day after day passed. He was no longer young. His career—that is his political career—was a thing of the past. People gave up visiting him. He was too silent to be worth asking to dinner. He never talked to anyone about his serious ambitions; their lack of understanding was apparent in their behaviour.

He leaned back in his chair now and watched Charles lift the stones on



And he does not want to be the officeholder of any important position, instead he just want to possess the series of solid objects which mean nothing to the others. Halfway through the story we are also being told about this transition, the transformation which was becoming evident to everyone and how it completely changed his life. He was no longer young, his career that is his political career was the thing of the past, people gave up visiting him, he was too silent to be worth asking to dinner. He never talked to anyone about his serious ambitions, the lack of understanding was apparent in his behaviour that is the crocs of the story as lack of understanding, the inability to understand the kind of passion that John has for something which does not have any value at all.

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A *Haunted House*, and other short stories, by Virginia Woolf : chapter10

"I've not given it up," John replied.

"But you've not the ghost of a chance now," said Charles roughly.

"I don't agree with you there," said John with conviction. Charles looked at him and was profoundly uneasy; the most extraordinary doubts possessed him; he had a queer sense that they were talking about different things. He looked round to find some relief for his horrible depression, but the disorderly appearance of the room depressed him still further. What was that stick, and the old carpet bag hanging against the wall? And then those stones? Looking at John, something fixed and distant in his expression alarmed him. He knew only too well that his mere appearance upon a platform was out of the question.

"Pretty stones," he said as cheerfully as he could; and saying that he had an appointment to keep, he left John—for ever.



I am not very sure whether even if the contemporary things have really changed or whether we are able to understand this kind of passion which beats all kinds of rationality. Coming back to the end of the story. When Charles asked him “What made you give it up like that all in a second?” John replies, “I have not given it up” “But you have not the ghost of a chance now” says Charles roughly. “I do not agree with you there” says John with conviction, Charles looked at him and is profoundly uneasy. The most extraordinary doubts possessed him, he had a queer sense that they were talking about different things. He looked around to find some relief for his horrible depression, but that orderly appearance of the room depressed him still further.

What was that stick, and the old carpet bag hanging against the wall? And then those stones? Looking at John, something fixed and distant in his expression alarmed him. He knew only too well that his mere appearance upon a platform was out of the question. “Pretty stones” he said as cheerfully as he could, and saying that he had an appointment to keep, he left John... forever. And it is very evident that Charles really had a choice because here he finds his friend slipping away in madness into complete insanity and he realises that they had always been talking about entirely different things and this is significant because even as the story begins we get this feeling that the body on the left and the body on the right are not really on the same page.

The body on the left and the body on the right are talking about 2 entirely different things, obsessing about 2 entirely different things. It is just that Charles have bought them together pursuing similar kinds of ambitions, but it certainly was not there to stay. Attempting to make for the sense of the story I want to draw your attention to Walter Benjamin’s discussions on the impulse collect. According to Walter Benjamin he was a Marxist critic, he identified this impulse collect as an (())(22:41) impulse, and that is a situation which the desire for the object proceeds reason.

In other words, the collector or the character in the story John, we find him approaching objects with some kind of a democratic attitude and this is what Walter Benjamin also had pointed out that this collector who is anarchic, who is working under this anarchic impulse, he also has his democratic attitude towards the material world where he says junk shops and museums and the things that he gets from the roadside in similar ways. And it is a kind of arching that is kind of a democracy that he celebrates as well, and there are 3 kinds of

collectors that Walter Benjamin also encourages us to think about; the private and the public one and the personal which is entirely different.

The private and the public are different but it can still be clubbed together in the sense that in a private collector, one who collect things privately we find him that person transforming things to something else which has an external value, and it is pretty much the same in a public collector as well accept that for a public collector his act of collecting objects, it almost gets away more of a legitimate kind of a status, it is more justifiable. And very often we find getting displayed on a social or an academic level, we find that getting increasingly getting manifested and contemporary art forms as well. So the private and the public collector tells the justifiability about them, there is a legitimacy and some kind of a rational and credibility associated with them.

But the personal collector which is where we can place John in this story, he is not the private or the public collector, there is an inability for him to communicate with rest of the world the value of the things that he is collected. So for him, the personal collector that he is the desire towards the things, the desire towards the objects is also about losing himself. He is not able to find himself once he begins; pursuing that there is a possessive addictive passion of collecting objects. And in the personal collector's life we also realise that since it is not something which can be projected well in the public domain, the encounter with the object it also transforms the thing as well as oneself.

The things transforms in personal collector's eyes and that is not something which is visible to the rest of the world, but the collector himself undergoes a radical change which is of course available to everyone and not certainly encouraging, it is a disappointing change and it is more or less like a fall from the glory that was. So in the personal collector's story like we would see in the John's story, we find loyalty to the thing being displayed and this at some level is very original, very pure, it does not have any other kinds of ambitions steering it forward.

And in John's case, if we see John as this anarchical actor, we also realise that the transformation of things is concerned in his eyes, the otherwise forgettable objects they undergo a transition which the others are unable to understand and which he is unable to communicate, which he is unable to get across. And extending Walter Benjamin's argument, it is also possible to say that an art collector in the contemporary an art collector who is dallying in objects in the contemporary, the moment he situates himself or herself within the

practice of art that is a certain respectability that also comes to him. And of course there is a way in which we can extend these arguments to materiality and to how capitalism changes the world the way art is being conceived, and how things began to acquire value.

How value is being added to various objects depending on how it get situated. Perhaps, thinking about the museum as a space is one of the best ways to look at it, if you look at the Museum it is the place of knowledge production, it holds the keys to vast amount of knowledge, but at the same time the world of the museum is not real. Of course it reflects reality of the outside, it reflects the reality of the material world which was and which still is, but at the same time there is an unreal nature to the museum.

Compare that with anarchic collector that is someone like John is, John in this short story "Solid objects" we find that the objects within the museum, it could be completely rational, it could be a stone, it could be something from the past which cannot be situated in the present in anyway, but at the same time there is a way in which we are able to treat it with double ambiguity. We are able to attribute certain value to it so that it adds to the knowledge production and in that sense by extension becomes a significant addition to the understanding of human behaviour, understanding of human history itself.

In John's case when Charles visits John and sees all of these terrible objects at home and the thing which he had collected randomly from here and there which looks only like rags to Charles, we find that it is an unnatural environments, it is not a healthy environment out of which anything productive could come. And compared that with a museum, it could be the same kinds of things which is inside but it is organised in such a way that it is situated within certain knowledge system and it is also a naturalised unnatural environments, and it effectively significant about how different ways in which knowledge systems work and how they are schematically arranged within particular discursive traditions.

As we try to wrap up the story, I want you to think about how John as this anarchic collector, he leads the object to take over his life entirely. And what he does in this process is also very very intrinsically modernist, he lets go of the need to define them, there is no way in which he tries to position it in such a way that the others can also see how it is projected, where it can be situated and what its value could be. So he lets go of this entirely to define up, which is what modernism literary modernism also did to a very large extent. The writers, the works that came out, they try to completely get rid of this need to define anything, need to situate a meaning within a context and make it accessible for everyone to see.

And this certainly a process which causes madness, and we find that this precisely is the process which led John slip away to madness. And here madness is the result of being unable to share his experience, and this story in that sense remains as a story which is about a man who is unable to share his story because he fails to situate it within a framework which is readily accessible to others and in a very typically modernist way. Perhaps Virginia Woolf is also trying to tell us that at the end of the day even when you are telling the story, the story really have very little role to play in shaping the reality, and shaping the many situations that one is (31:00) within.

And one is able to look at the story “Solid Objects” as the sides of life from one of those modernist episodes as an extension of one of those ways in which literary modernism had been exemplified. I think it is an important key to access the ideas of modernism itself, I encourage you to go through this story and take a look at it by yourself and that you all go and get a sense of the discussions and the many critical frameworks within which modernism has been situated. Thank you for listening, and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.