

Literary Criticism
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Virginia Woolf's Modern Fiction

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"Modern Fiction" by Virginia Woolf
from McNeill, Andrew. Ed. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928. London:
The Hogarth Press, 1964.



Modern Fiction

In making any survey, even the freest and looest, of modern fiction, it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old. With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! Their masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity. And yet the analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making motor cars scarcely holds good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle. It need scarcely be said that we make no claim to stand, even momentarily, upon that vantage ground. On the flat, in the crowd, half-blind with dust, we look back with envy to those happier warriors, whose battle is won and whose achievements wear so serene

157



Hello and welcome to the course on Literary Criticism. In today's session we will be discussing Virginia Woolf's critical essay *Modern Fiction*. This essay was originally published in 1919 under the title *Modern Novels*, and was then revised and republished in 1925 with the title *Modern Fiction*. Now before we begin this essay, we will look at the era in which it was written as a work of literary criticism.

This was the modernist era, which is roughly from 1900 to 1940, that is the first part of the 20th century. Now, the modern era was characterized by several transformations and developments from the preceding Victorian age. The major event that occurred at this time was the First World War. This war was different from any other war that had happened before, because of the large scale violence, death, destruction and loss of life that it brought about.

In fact, the generation, which lived through the First World War was called The Lost Generation, because a large number of aspiring young men had lost their lives in the war and they left behind their families, their widows, and their children who grew up without parents.

There was disillusionment, there was displacement, and a loss of faith in government, in religion, in family life, in traditional gender roles, in patriarchal values, and other things which had been traditionally taught to the young people of that time. So, the First World War had a strong impact on the way modernists saw the world around them. It gave them an idea of a world that was changing too fast, a world that was not merely progressing but was also bringing destruction in its wake. So though the modern era was characterized by many technological developments and innovations, these developments were not necessarily seen as being for the progress of mankind.

These developments could also be deployed for the destruction of human lives and for perpetuating warfare. So, there were other influences on modernist thought, one of those influences was the theories of the scientist, Albert Einstein, who propounded the theory of relativity, which had a deep impact on the way modernists perceive time and history in their narratives.

Another significant influence from this era is the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Freudian theories about the unconscious, the subconscious, and the inner states of consciousness had a great influence on the way narrative was constructed in modernist novels. Another innovation during this time was the rise of the cinema, which threatened to overtake literature and fiction as the most popular medium of expression. But at the same time, modernist novels also appropriated some of the techniques of cinema such as the use of montage and vignettes, where the images followed one after the other in a sequence, and thoughts and images were presented in the form of a snapshot.

So when we look at the characteristics features of the modernist age, we find that the novelists felt that the previous techniques of the Victorian era were inadequate for them to deal with their present reality. It was completely inadequate for them to represent the lived realities of the people of the modern age. So they tried to develop a new form of art and this form of art came to be known as literary modernism.

Now, if you look at the chief characteristics of this form of literary modernism, there are several and not just confined to that age, this form of art continued to be practiced for a long time afterwards and traces of it can be found even in some fiction written in the 1800s.

By and large, Bradbury and MacFarlane in their guide to modernism define modernism in art as follows, they call it. I quote, “an art of a rapidly modernizing world, a world of rapid

industrial development, advanced technology, urbanization, secularization, and mass forms of social life.”

So, we see here that industrialization and the changes that it had brought along with it, such as urbanization and the development in technology are very important socio cultural backgrounds to the modernist novel. And this also has led to a form of secularization, which could be read as a loss of faith in organized religion.

And you also see that the modernists were writing at a time of mass forms of social life, people were increasingly able to connect with each other through the new forms of technology. But at the same time, they were also alienated and experienced a specific kind of loneliness and despair brought about by the modern capitalist age.

Bradbury and McFarlane continue with their definition of modernism in art, they say “this is an art of a world from which many traditional certainties had departed, and a certain sort of Victorian confidence, not only in the onward progress of mankind, but in the very solidarity and visibility of reality itself had evaporated”, so this is very important.

The idea of traditional certainties having departed and evaporated is a very important idea in understanding modernism, because the modernists, like people who lead any movement, were consciously or unconsciously rebelling against what came before them. And what came before them in this case is the traditions of the Victorian era with its certainty that technology is going to lead to the growth and development of mankind, with its certainty about religion and reality.

Modernists were very consciously fighting against this form of realism. But we must not mistake the modernist project as one that is antirealist. In fact, modernists practice a form of hyperrealism. They wanted an alternative form of realism, a new form of realism, to explain the new reality that they witnessed around them.

So, in summarizing the main features of the modernist era, we must also consider the innovations in the literary form, exemplified by the technique of free indirect discourse or the stream of consciousness technique. Now, the stream of consciousness technique was inspired by psychology, it is a narrative technique whereby the author presents the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories and associations in the minds of the character, as it is experienced by them, without any explanation, without any external commentary, and without adherence to strict notions of time, because the mind does not work that way.

So, the mind often fluctuates between the past and the present, it thinks about what will happen in the future. So, this kind of flux in the way the mind thinks is very realistically, meticulously represented in the fiction of modernist writers.

And if you look at the distinguishing features of modernist literature, unlike the traditional novels that focused on the social development of character, the modernist novels focused on the individual's psychological being. And while traditional fiction focused on the descriptions of the external in an objective manner, the modernist writers focused on descriptions of the internal consciousness in a subjective manner. And while traditional novels adhered to the linear sequence of time, and had a very clear dramatic plot, the modernist novels fluctuated between the past and the present, and focused more on the momentary, fragmented thoughts that pass through the mind of the characters who inhabit these novels.

So having looked at these distinguishing characteristic features, we will begin with Virginia Woolf's seminal essay *Modern Fiction*. Woolf's project in this essay is to, one, critique her contemporaries, namely HG Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett. She also sets out to reveal the varying literary trends of the 1910s and the 1920s.

She also very consciously creates a binary between two kinds of novelists, one group whom she calls the materialists and another group, whom she labels the spiritualists. And then she goes on to discuss what she considers to be the proper stuff of fiction. And she concludes the essay with a discussion of modern Russian writers and the kind of influence that they could have on British English writing.

So, in the beginning of the essay, Virginia Woolf makes a clear point about the distinctiveness of modern fiction because of the age in which it is written. She cites other writers like Jane Austen and Henry Fielding as being remarkable novelists, as being admirable novelists, but as being writers who were writing from a completely different standpoint, given the times in which they lived.

So, she seems to distinguish between the novelists of the past and her contemporaries because of the difference in their lived realities, and therefore she believes that the tools that the modern writers have at their disposal are very different from the tools that the traditional novelists had at their disposal to analyse and understand human life and represent it in their fiction.

In the second paragraph, she goes on to criticize those writers whom she considers to be materialists. These are writers who were best-selling authors at that time, they were quite popular writers. HG Wells' novels still continue to be very popular, and there are film adaptations being made of his novels even now.

So, Virginia Woolf's criticism of these popular writers is quite courageous, it is quite bold. And her main reason for critiquing these writers is not their lack of craftsmanship or their skill in constructing plot and storyline and coming up with exciting sensational narratives.

She does not find fault with them on any of these points, she just feels that these writers have compromised by trying to cater to the market rather than to find out what she believes to be "the proper stuff of fiction". These writers are not largely concerned with revealing the truth as the modernists would call it.

And this is another interesting feature of modernist literature is that these writers, while they believed in the fragmentary nature of life and psychological being, still believed in a kind of unity, they still believed in a kind of a truth that would transcend all this chaos. And this is in stark contrast to the postmodernists who celebrated chaos, who did not believe that there could be one evident truth that can be distilled.

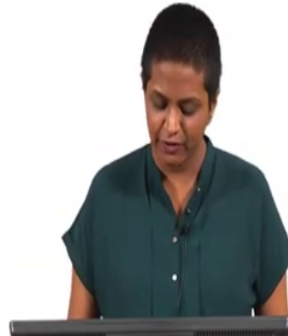
But Virginia Woolf believes that there is a truth which fiction can reveal, and which the writers should strive to reach. But neither of these writers who are really popular at this time have found a way to arrive at this truth.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:38)

THE ESSAYS

an air of accomplishment that we can scarcely refrain from whispering that the fight was not so fierce for them as for us. It is for the historian of literature to decide, for him to say if we are now beginning or ending or standing in the middle of a great period of prose fiction, for down in the plain little is visible. We only know that certain gratuities and hostilities inspire us; that certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert; and of this perhaps it may be worth while to attempt some account.

Our quarrel, then, is not with the classics, and if we speak of quarrelling with Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy, it is partly that by the mere fact of their existence in the flesh their work has a living, breathing, everyday imperfection which bids us take what liberties with it we choose. But it is also true that, while we thank them for a thousand gifts, we reserve our unconditional gratitude for Mr Hardy, for Mr Conrad, and in a much lesser degree for the Mr Hudson of *The Purple Land*, *Green Mansions*, and *Far Away and Long Ago*.⁴ Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do. No single phrase will sum up the charge or grievance which we have to bring against a mass of work so large in its volume and embodying so many qualities, both admirable and the reverse. **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.** Naturally, no single word reaches the centre of three separate targets. 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 worse 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 win-



1955

here! That is a risk which the creator of *The Old Wives' Tale*, George Cannon, Edwin Clayhanger,⁵ and hosts of other figures, may well claim to have surmounted. **His characters live abundantly, even unexpectantly, 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 density to which they travel so luxuriously becomes more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton. It can scarcely be said of Mr Wells that he is a materialist in the sense that he takes too much delight in the solidity of his fabric. His mind is too generous in its sympathies to allow him to spend much time in making things shipshape and substantial. **He is a materialist from sheer goodness of heart, taking upon his shoulders the work that ought to have been discharged by Government officials, and in the plethora of his ideas and facts scarcely having leisure to realize, or forgetting to think important, the crudity and coarseness of his human beings.** Yet what more damaging criticism can there be both of his earth and of his Heaven than that they are to be inhabited here and hereafter by his Joans and his Percys?⁶ Does not the inferiority of their natures tarnish whatever institutions and ideals may be provided for them by the generosity of their creator? Nor, profoundly though we respect the integrity and humanity of Mr Galsworthy, shall we find what we seek in his pages.

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 transient appear the true and the enduring. We have to admit that we are excessive, and, further, that we find it difficult to justify our discontent by explaining what it is that we exact. We frame our question differently at different times. But it re-appears most persistently as we drop the finished novel on the crest of a sigh -- **is it worth while? What is the point of it all?** Can it be that, owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time, Mr Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes, and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of



So I quote from Woolf's essay. She says, "If we try to formulate our meaning in one word, we should say that these 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 maybe, and marches if only into the desert, the better for its soul."

So, the accusation that she levelled against these writers is that they are materialists. They are more concerned with descriptions of the external material circumstances than with the internal lives of their characters. And she says the biggest culprit here is Arnold Bennett because he is actually a really good craftsman, and his novels can be compared to a beautiful house that is designed wonderfully.

But it is a house with no life in it. According to her, “Bennett's characters live abundantly even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live and what do they live for?” So, the characters are well defined, their external circumstances, their appearance, all of these things are described in detail, but these characters do not have a depth of soul. They acts as props for the novelist to construct a great plot and that is their sole purpose in the novel. Virginia Woolf believes that this kind of characterization is clearly materialist. And she then goes on to berate HG Wells in a very sarcastic way.

She says, “HG Wells is a materialist from sheer goodness of heart, taking upon his shoulders, the work that ought to have been discharged by government officials, and in the plethora of his ideas and facts, scarcely having leisure to realize or forgetting to think important, the crudity and coarseness of his human beings.” So HG Wells’ novels are full of facts, full of information, and they can be quite delightful to the reader.

But the accumulation of data and facts and information, she believes, is not the task of novelists but that of government officials. And as a result of his focus on such things, his characters turn out to be very crude and coarse and you could call them cardboard characters because she says his Jones and his Peters, they have an inferiority of nature. This is Virginia Woolf’s critique of the works of HG Wells.

She then goes on to underline what really offends her about these novelists. “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.”

So their main problem seems to be that they make things which are trivial and which are transitory, seem like the truth, the eternal truth. And this what Virginia Woolf takes offense with. And she says, though readers might enjoy these novels for the moment, then they have to ask themselves, “Is it worthwhile? What is the point of it all?”

And this seems like a very philosophical question as well. We begin to wonder about what the point of life is, and you have to remember that the modernist age was also a time when existential philosophy in the aftermath of the First World War, and before the beginning of the Second World War was gaining popularity. Virginia Woolf’s question, “Is it worthwhile? What is the point of it all? is not just for the novel, but also a question about human existence.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:55)

THE ESSAYS

as critics are prone to do, of reality. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misleads than secures the thing we seek. **Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.** Nevertheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. **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. 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. **Life like that! Must needs be like that!****

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 so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. **Life is not a series of gagg paragraphs geometrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or com-****



And she feels that in the works of these material writers, life escapes. They are so concerned with descriptions of the external, that the essence of life is lost. She says “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this the essential thing has moved off or on and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.”

She believes that the craft of these writers, while they may apply to a different age, do not apply to a modern age. And they become ill fitting clothes or ill-fitting vestments that do not capture the life or spirit of the people living in this age.

Now, what could be the reasons for writers not trying to find the essence of life or the truth of art? According to Virginia Woolf, the reasons are very monetary because the writer is a slave to a tyrant, she does not clearly define who this tyrant is, but we can read it as her criticism of the market, the market for books, and the publishers who put pressure on the writers to produce certain best-selling works.

And in order to write these kinds of best-selling works, the writers have to employ a formula --adding and mixing a little bit of tragedy, a little bit of comedy, a little bit of romance, and then a little bit of sensationalism, to create a dramatic plot. And Virginia Woolf feels that this kind of formulaic construction of a novel, clearly defies the purpose of true art, true literature.

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.”

It is the fashion of the hour that seems to matter, not really an adherence to craft, not really a commitment to truth, but rather following the fashion of the hour is what seems to be the primary concern of these Edwardian writers whom she calls materialists. And she concludes this part of the essay with a very piercing question, “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?”

So, clearly, Virginia Woolf does think that this is the best that a novelist can do in the modern age. She feels that there is more to life, there is more to literature, and that we as readers must ask ourselves these questions in order to encourage writers to produce the best that they can. So what is it that Virginia considers to be the ideal novel to be?

Why does she feel that Wells and Bennett and Goldsworthy can do better? And if they can do better, what course are they to take? What method are they to employ? What technique are they to follow? So the obvious answer to this question would be, the modernist techniques of fiction, but Virginia Woolf does not give us easy answers.

In the next session of the essay she will describe those writers whom she considers to be spiritualists. And these are writers whose work she approves of in comparison to the works of the materialists. But even then, Virginia Woolf does not tell us that fiction has to be written in this way or that way in order to be considered proper. She leaves that ambiguous and she leaves the question to the reader. So, in the next session, we will discuss and take up this question, “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” further. Thank you.