

Literary Criticism
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Virginia Woolf's Modern Fiction (Session 2)

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THE ESSAY

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 blinding out the light of the conception. The writer seems, concerned, 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 cease to live they would find themselves dovetail 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. **Is life like that? Must novels 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 instant 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 lose his neck 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 pig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a hazy halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. It is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and unclassified spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and



Hello and welcome to the lecture on Virginia Woolf's essay *Modern Fiction*. In the last part of our discussion we ended with the question, "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" From this point onwards the essay becomes a sort of manifesto, in which Virginia Woolf seems to be listing out the features of the ideal modernist novel.

But at the same time, Woolf does not praise modernist writers entirely, because she feels that modernist writers have a lot to learn from other writers of fiction, particularly modern Russian novelists. So we will look at what she considers to be the important things that a novelist should keep in mind while composing fiction.

The modernists are not concerned with dramatic or sensationalist aspects of life. They want to record ordinary life and endow it with literary value, and to look at day to day experiences from a very artistic point of view, that is one of the projects that the modernist writers embark on. For instance, James Joyce in *Ulysses*, has his protagonist, perform very menial tasks; and his day to day tasks of brushing and sleeping and defecating become literary events of sorts. So, it is very important to locate modernists within the socio-cultural framework in which they were writing, where grand narratives were regarded with scepticism.

And the way in which traditional novels uphold a certain hero and certain characters are glorified or presented as the ideal of virtue or the idea of vice-- these are the conventions of the novel that is brought into sharp criticism by modernist writers. Victorian social realism, to a large extent, dealt with characters who were neither entirely good, neither entirely bad.

But the modernists take this a step further by trying to record the thoughts and impressions of characters as they react to various situations and circumstances around them. So here, Virginia Woolf says, "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives myriad impressions, trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an insistent shower of innumerable atoms." This is an often quoted phrase from this essay, she compares thoughts to "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms", "and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday." Monday and Tuesday are normal working days in the lives of people. So Virginia Woolf believes that even on any given day, the mind is bombarded with a series of thoughts, which she compares to atoms.

So these thoughts could be trivial, these thoughts could be serious, they could be very frivolous or they could be very deep. But it is the job of the novelist to try to understand what their characters might be thinking or feeling at any given point of time.

And she believes that if writers actually had the freedom to write whatever they want, without any concern for the financial aspect of it, or without any concern as to whether it will become a best seller, then definitely they would create novels, create works of fiction, without a love interest or without a tragedy track or a comedy track.

And this is because she believes that people who try to sincerely represent life as it is, would not be concerned with sensationalizing it. They would not see life as a chronological sequence of events that should lead to some grand conclusion. And novels, if they are true to reality would have no beginning, middle or end, which are definitive.

Novels would not have to necessarily make their characters get married in the end. Novels need not introduce an element of intrigue just to keep the readers excited and invested in the plot. This form of writing, she feels, a writing that is true to reality, that is willing to par away or willing to chisel away all unnecessary, trivial things in order to reach the truth of art and life.

This kind of writing she feels is spiritual, and this is a kind of writing that she feels should be encouraged in the modern times. This is because life, according to Woolf, “is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”

So, here you can again read this with reference to the characteristics of modernist fiction that we discussed before. Their philosophy of life is that it is not something that is very neat, that is very ordered that is very symmetrical. Life can be very chaotic, the minds of people can be very chaotic and it is the task of the novelist to represent this reality as it is without any compromise.

“Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien, and external as possible?”

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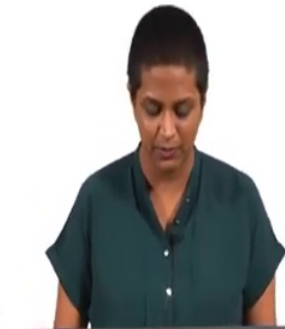
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external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity, we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.

It is, at any rate, in some such fashion as this that we seek to define the quality which distinguishes the work of several young writers, among whom Miss James Joyce is the most notable, from that of their predecessors. They attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if so do so they must discard more of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. Let us record the aims 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. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.

Any one who has read *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or, what promises to be a far more interesting work, *Ulysses*, now appearing in the *Little Review*, will have hazarded some theory of this nature as to Mr Joyce's intention.¹ On our part, with such a fragment before us, it is hazardous rather than affirming, but while quite the intention of the whole, there can be no question but that it is of the utmost sincerity and that the result, difficult or unpleasant as we may judge it, is undeniably important. In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr Joyce is spiritually he is contented at all costs to reveal the flickering of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventuresome, whether it be probability, or coherence, or any other of these suppositions which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see. The scene in the cemetery, for instance, with its brilliancy, its wordiness, its incoherence, its sudden lightning flashes of significance, does undoubtedly come so close to the quick of the mind that, on a first reading at any rate, it is difficult not to acclaim a masterpiece. If we want life itself, here surely we have it. Indeed, we find ourselves stumbling rather awkwardly if we try to say what we wish, and for what reason a work of such originality yet fails to compare, for we must take high examples, with *Youth* or *The Mayor of Cambridge*.² It fails because of the comparative poverty of the writer's mind, we might say simply and have

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“We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity. We are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe.” She poses the question, Is it not the task of the novelist to be bold enough to represent this complexity of life, the complexity of the human mind, without having to resort to simple formulas just to make their novels appealing to readers?

What she says here is we are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity. We are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe.

So this kind of experimentation with fiction would definitely require courage and sincerity. But it is not just these things that Woolf is concerned with here. She is also trying to understand what constitutes, what she calls the proper stuff of fiction. This is again an often quoted phrase from this essay, What really is the proper stuff of fiction?

And in the end, Virginia Woolf does not give us a definitive answer but her point is that the proper stuff of fiction is not adherence to convention, it is not following blindly whatever was done in the past and became successful. And this kind of blind adherence to past traditions and past conventions, according to Woolf would never lead to good works of literature and art.

So this is again reflective of the modernist manifesto, their commitment to “making it new”. The modernists were people who were rebelling against an older framework of literature and in doing so, they are clearly trying to delineate, they are clearly trying to define a new aesthetic of the novel. And Virginia Woolf sees James Joyce, the Irish novelist, as an important pioneer of the form of fiction that will be a very honest representation of life as it is, an honest representation of the changed reality.

So according to Woolf, these new novelists, led by James Joyce, “attempt to come closer to life and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them. Even if to do so, they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. 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. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than what is commonly thought small.” So, Virginia Woolf is clearly giving a clarion call when using the phrase “let us record, let us trace, let us not take it for granted.”

So she is addressing her contemporaries-- not her contemporaries like Wells and Galsworthy and Bennett, who she considers to be materialist-- but her contemporaries who like her are spiritualists. She believes that these novelists must record atoms. Atoms is clearly here a metaphor for thoughts and perceptions, as they fall upon the minds of the character; and to trace patterns, however incoherent or disconnected the reader might feel about this kind of a narrative style, the novelist must be committed to it.

And the novelist must not distinguish between things that are too small or too trivial to be dealt with in depth. The novelist must not fall into the trap of trivializing things just because they are small and seem insignificant. And this is again in keeping with the commitment to representing ordinariness that the modernists adhere to.

She then clearly acknowledges the fact that this kind of commitment is not going to have altogether perfect results. Of course, there are many novelists who might fail in their attempts to represent this new reality. There is a possibility that they might not be met with critical acclaim even if they produce works of merit, but it is important that they continue to strive to remain spiritual and to aspire to the truth of life and art.

According to Woolf, “In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr Joyce is spiritual. He is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickering of that innermost flame, which flashes its messages through the brain. And in order to preserve it, he disregards with complete courage, whatever seems to him adventitious. Whether it be probability or coherence, or any other of these signposts, which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see.”

And she is very clear about her conclusion that James Joyce is a spiritualist. That is because he is concerned with what she calls, “the flickering of that innermost flame”. This is again an often quoted phrase from this essay. This is clearly a reference to the soul. So, according to Woolf, a truly sincere novelist would be concerned with representing the joy, the sorrow, the anguish, the frivolity, the depth of the soul.

And she finds that James Joyce, in his quest to achieve this kind of representation, is brave enough to do away with inessential descriptions and details of material things. And she sees that it might be difficult for someone like him, someone who writes like him to capture the imagination of a reader, who have very rarely been called upon to imagine what they cannot touch or see.

So, it is in the spirit that Virginia Woolf identifies the purpose of fiction. Readers have been accustomed to internalize fiction that gives them easy answers and simple description of external things as being the best kind of fiction. But she believes that this is not the case. She then goes on to talk about the works of Thomas Hardy, particularly his novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and Joseph Conrad, particularly his short story “Youth”.

In talking about these works of fiction, Virginia Woolf seems to unfavourably compare Joyce to these writers. Now this might seem as a bit of a surprise, because so far Woolf seems to have been praising Joyce's spirituality, his commitment to the truth, his courage in doing away with unnecessary descriptions and details. And while all this holds good, Virginia Woolf feels that his fiction overall is not as good as that of Thomas Hardy or Joseph Conrad.

The reason for this, which she slowly seems to reveal to the reader, is the very thing for which she praised him. She praises James Joyce for his commitment to portraying the impressions of the mind as they, for giving importance to small, insignificant things, things which are at least considered to be insignificant in the eyes of the world.

But it is this very same absorption, too much of it, that leads to the failure, which he sees in his work. Now, Virginia Woolf considers James Joyce to be a great novelist, but she is also able to identify his failings. His failings lie in his strengths, which is very interesting because James Joyce seems to be too self-absorbed, according to Virginia Woolf.

And there is a kind of egoism in the work of James Joyce, which tends to confine and shut in life. She previously said that the materialists, in focusing too much on external things, have let life escape. But some of the modernists, particularly James Joyce and another one of their contemporaries, Dorothy Richardson, are too confined, have shut life in. While the materialists have let life escape, the modernists have confined life to the degree that it does not entertain, it does not reveal much about things other than an egoistic version of the self.

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done with it. But it is possible to press a little further and wonder whether we may not refer our sense of being in a bright yet narrow room, confined and shut in, rather than enlarged and set free, to some limitation imposed by the method as well as by the mind. Is the method that inhibits the creative power? Is it due to the method that we feel neither joy of our magnanimous, but control as a rule which, in spite of its terrors of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside itself and beyond? Does the emphasis laid, perhaps didactically, upon indecency, contribute to the effect of something singular and isolated? Or is it merely that in any effort of such originality it is much easier, for contemporaries especially, to feel what it lacks than to name what it gives? In any case it is a man's task to stand outside examining 'methods'. Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers, that brings us closer to the novelist's intention if we are readers. This method has the merit of bringing us closer to what we were prepared to call life itself, did not the reading of *Ulysses* suggest how much of life is excluded or ignored, and did it not come with a shock to open *Tristram Shandy* or even *Finnegans* and be by them convinced that there are not only other aspects of life, but more important ones into the bargain.

However this may be, the problem before the novelist at present, as we suppose it to have been in the past, is to contrive means of being free to set down what he chooses. He has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer 'this' but 'that', out of 'that' alone must be constructed his work. For the moderns 'that', the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently, the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different surface of life becomes necessary, difficult but as to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors. No one but a modern, no one perhaps but a Russian, would have felt the interest of the situation which Tolstoy has made into the short story which he calls 'Gusev'.¹² Some Russian soldiers lie ill on board a ship which is taking them back to Russia. We are given a few scraps of their talk and some of their thoughts; then one of them dies and is carried away; the talk goes on among the others for a time, until Gusev himself dies, and looking like a carter or a radish¹³ is thrown overboard. The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all, and then, as the eyes accustomed themselves



What is the reason behind this failure on the part of James Joyce to live up to the legacy of writers such as Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad? Is it the method? That is the question that she asks, Is it the method? Now, his method is also like Virginia Woolf, the stream of consciousness technique. So, if it is his method, this goes against the modernist manifesto, the idea of this essay being the modernist manifesto.

So, when Virginia Woolf ask the question, is it the method that inhibits the creative power? You must pre-empt her answer, which is clearly it is not the method. The method can be anything, novelists can employ different methods to convey their intentions, to convey their ideas.

It is not really the method that destroys a work of fiction, it is too much adherence to certain aspects of writing, while ignoring the other aspects of writing that are equally important. So according to her, James Joyce gives too much of importance to the self, too much of importance to impressionistic details, but not enough importance to the soul, not enough importance to the human spirit.

Woolf then makes the assertion, “Any method is right, every method right that expresses what we wish to express if we are writers, that brings us closer to the novelists intention if we are readers.” So method is not the most important thing, method is not the priority, it is something else, and what is that thing?

According to Woolf, the novelist must have the courage to say what he feels, to say clearly that this is not what I am interested in, it is rather *that* that interests me. So what is this *that* here in this context? For Woolf, she believes that the thing that modern writers are and should be most interested in is psychology.

She says “For the moderns ‘that’, the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, in comprehensible to our predecessors.”

She feels that the modernists are dealing with a different thematic concern, which is very difficult for the writers who came before them to understand or to grasp or to evaluate. So, here, Virginia Woolf slowly moves on to the form of fiction that she considers to be the ones which British writers must emulate, must be inspired by, and that is the Russian method of writing fiction.

And she goes on into a detailed description of Anton Chekhov's short story “Gusev”, in which the writer describes a soldier who is returning to Russia on a ship full of sick people. And over the course of this journey, the title character dies, and he is just compared to a carrot or a radish and his corpse is thrown overboard.

So, she says this is a brilliant example of conveying a slice of life without unnecessary dramatization, without having to categorize it in into a tragedy or a comedy. And James Joyce, according to her, does this brilliantly in certain segments of his novels. The example that she gives here is the cemetery scene from *Ulysses* in which she believes that James Joyce demonstrates his skill as a great novelist.

So, in discussing Russian fiction, Virginia Woolf mentions writers such as Dostoevsky and Anton Chekhov.

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to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room we see how complete the story is, how profound, and how truly in obedience to his vision Tolstoy has chosen this, that, and the other, and placed them together to compose something new. But it is impossible to say 'this is comic', or 'that is tragic', nor are we certain, since short stories, we have been taught, should be brief and conclusive, whether this, which is vague and inconclusive, should be called a short story at all.

The most elementary remarks upon modern English fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence, and if the Russians are mentioned one runs the risk of feeling that to write of any fiction save theirs is waste of time. If we want understanding of the soul and heart where else shall we find it of comparable profundity? If we are sick of our own materialism the least considerable of their novelists has by right of birth a natural reverence for the human spirit. 'Learn to make yourself akin to people... But let this sympathy be not with the mind - for it is easy with the mind - but with the heart, with love towards them.' 'In every great Russian writer we seem to discern the features of a saint, a sympathy for the suffering of others, love towards them, endeavour to reach some goal worthy of the most exacting demands of the spirit, constant saintliness. It is the saint in them which confounds us with a feeling of our own irreligious triviality, and turns so many of our famous novels to mud and rickety. 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 never be left to oneself and one 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 farther than we do and without our gross impetuosity of vision. But perhaps we see something that escapes them, or why should this voice of protest mix itself with our gloom? The voice of protest is the voice of another and an ancient civilization which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than to suffer and understand. English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body. But any deductions that we may draw

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She says that it is these writers who capture the human spirit in the most ideal way. In fact, she says, British writers are quite materialist by comparison. "If we are sick of our own materialism, the least considerable of their novelists has by right of birth, a natural reverence for the human spirit." "In every Great Russian writer, we seem to discern the features of a saint, if sympathy for the suffering of others, love towards them, endeavour to reach some goal worthy of the most exacting demands of the spirit, constitutes saintliness." She in fact, calls the Russian writers not just spiritualist but as saints.

According to Virginia Woolf, Russian writers are not just spiritualists but saints because of their capacity to empathize, to try to reach the highest levels of authenticity and to love others, in the sense of trying to understand them the best that they can. And Russian writers are also people who are quite inconclusive.

They do not offer you easy answers, their works end on a note of ambiguity, they are inconclusive, there are several solutions, and it is up to the reader to decide. Now, this kind of approach is favoured by Virginia Woolf, but she feels that the Russian writers take it too far because their inconclusiveness leads to a sense of gloom and doom and tragedy.

While praising Russian writers for creating works that Virginia Woolf considers to be the epitome of spiritual writing, she feels that there is a sense of despair that is very prominent in the works of these writers. And being a British novelist, she is more used to a spirit of resilience than resignation, she is more used to a fighting spirit than a spirit of suffering and surrender, which the Russians seem to champion.

She ultimately feels that there should be more moderation in fiction, so the proper stuff of fiction is not that of the materialists, the proper stuff of fiction is not entirely that of the modernists, the proper stuff of fiction is not entirely that of the Russians either.

Virginia Woolf is very clear in her rejection of a certain kind of materialistic formulaic writing. And she seems to be praising the spiritual writing of some of her contemporaries, particularly James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson, but at the same time, she finds their work lacking in its exploration of the soul.

But on the other hand, you find that the works of Russian literature really offer a window into the human soul, while at the same time writing that is free of categorization, of the constraints of plot and drama and action. But at the same time, Russian fiction is also problematic because of its overall sense of resignation and despair, and inconclusiveness.

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THE ESSAYS

from the comparison of two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of the infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing – no ‘method’, no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden, but only fabled and pretence. ‘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, so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.

1—Originally published in the TLS, 10 April 1919, 3p. C471 under the title ‘Modern Novels’ (see *WV Essays*), this essay was revised for inclusion in CE. See also ‘On Reading Novels’, ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ and ‘Character in Fiction’, *WV Essays*, Reading Notes (Rng), 2002.

2—Henry Fielding (1707–54); Jane Austen (1775–1817), for *WV* on whom see ‘Jane Austen’ above.

3—H. G. Wells (1866–1945), on whose *John and Peter* (1918) *WV* wrote in ‘The Rights of Youth’, *WV Essays*; Arnold Bennett (1869–1931), for *WV* on whom see ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ and ‘Character in Fiction’, *WV Essays*; John Galsworthy (1867–1933), on whose *Reverend* (1917) *WV* wrote in ‘Mr Galsworthy’s Novel’, *WV Essays*.

4—Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), for *WV* on whom see ‘Thomas Hardy’s Novels’ and ‘Vlad of Thomas Hardy’ below; Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), for *WV* on whom see ‘Joseph Conrad’ below; W. H. Hudson (1841–1912), *The Purple Land* (1881), *Green Mansions* (1904), and *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918), for *WV*’s review of which see ‘Mr Hudson’s Childhood’ in *WV Essays*.

5—The *Old Wives’ Tale* (1908), George Gaskell appears in the ‘Cleopatra’ trilogy (Cleopatra, 1910, *Hilda Lessways*, 1911, *Three Times*, 1914).

6—See note 1 above.

7—See *WV*’s epigrammatic story in the collection *Monday or Tuesday* (1911), *CE*, p. 1123.

8—James Joyce (1882–1942).

9—A *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916–17), *Ulysses* (1922). As early as April 1911 Elzetta Winstan had approached the Woolfs to do, say, that The Hogarth Press might publish the whole of *Ulysses* (of which the first thirteen episodes, and part of the fourteenth, had merely appearing in the *Little Review* the previous month, continuing until December 1910), but for several reasons, legal and practical, this proved impossible. However, *WV* made notes on those episodes that appeared in the *Little Review* March–October 1914. Reading Notes (Rng), 2002.

10—‘Youth’ (1911), for *WV*’s views upon it see ‘Mr Conrad’s Youth’, *WV Essays*; Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1884). For the context see note in *CE* on ‘H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy’, *CE*, 1913, pp. 84–85.

11—*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) by Laurence Sterne, for

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So, in essence, what Virginia Woolf believes to be the proper stuff of fiction, and that is a question that she raised in the beginning. She concludes by saying that “ ‘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, and 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, so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.”

This is a very interesting conclusion because Virginia Woolf does not believe that there is any definitive thing called the proper stuff of fiction. So, what her essay does is not giving the reader definitive answers. In fact, her essay raises more questions and has more ambiguities than definite clear cut answers.

Virginia Woolf believes that the proper stuff of fiction is when perception is given importance, the things are recorded in as authentic a way as possible. And she sort of personifies the art of fiction. She says, if the art of fiction were to come before us, we would have to love her and honour her, but at the same time break her. And this is clearly the agenda of the modernists. So, we can follow those conventions and traditions that help us better understand our present world and our reality. qBut at the same time, we must question these conventions of the past. If we are to create anything new, we must subvert them, we must question them, we must to a certain extent, rebel against them in order to create something new. And Virginia Woolf believes that this is where the future lies.

The art of fiction is something that has to be honoured, it has to be loved, but it is also something that has to be constantly revised, re-visioned and recalibrated for newer times.
Thank you.