

Specific Features of Virginia Woolf as a Novelist

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Abstract

Recognized as one of the major figures of modern literature, Woolf is highly regarded both for her innovative fiction techniques and insightful contributions to literary criticism. In her short fiction, she explored such themes as the elusive nature of storytelling and character study, the nature of truth and reality, and the role of women in society. Like her novels, these highly individualized, stylistic works are noted for their subjective explorations and detailed poetic narratives that capture ordinary experience while depicting the workings and perceptions of the human mind. Written in an elliptical and impressionistic style, Woolf's brief, apparently plotless stories are considered to have significantly influenced the development of modern short fiction.

Keywords: Woolf, modernism, stream of consciousness, essay, novel, feminism.

1.0. Introduction

Virginia Woolf is considered one of the most prominent writers of the modernist movement. She was born in an affluent family in London to philosopher Leslie Stephen, which gives her access to libraries and other useful resources that helped her immensely in her initial education that later played a crucial role in establishing her as a widely admired intellectual female figure and novelist of her time. She is primarily known for her novels like "Mrs. Dalloway" (1925), "To The Lighthouse" (1927) and "Orlando: A Biography" (1928). Her reputation and greatness lie in her ability and creativity to use the "stream of consciousness" technique that was one of the most common techniques used by modernist writers. Using this literary device which is also loosely termed as an interior monologue, they, the modernist writers explored the interior psyche and emotions of their characters in a way that was unprecedented.

Unlike traditional realist novels, which relies heavily on a well-crafted linear plot which we, the audience usually witness through the eyes of the omniscient narrator, these modernist novels defied all such preconceived notions and tried their best to reflect the emotions of the characters like it happens in real-world i.e. the emotions and thoughts that go inside our mind are not always so logically coherent and connected as they are presented in realists novels but are often disconnected and random in essence. Apart from being hailed as a great modernist writer, Woolf is also regarded as a pioneering feminist figure. Her works which talk about feminist concerns are "A Room of One's Own" which is a long essay based on the lectures that she gave in women's college at Cambridge University in 1929 and "Three Guineas" (1938).

2.0. Achievements in Essay Writings

A distinguished and distinctive prose stylist, Virginia Woolf excelled in fiction, nonfiction, and her own unique hybrid of these genres in her two whimsical books "Orlando: A Biography" (1928) and "Flush: A Biography" (1933), which are variously categorized as fiction, nonfiction, or "other" by critics of her work. In nonfiction, essays such as "The Death of the Moth," "How Should One Read a Book?" and "Shakespeare's Sister" have been widely anthologized, and in their vividness, imagery, and keen analysis of daily life, literature, society, and women's concerns assure Woolf a place in the history of the essay.

In fiction, Woolf's classic novels, sharing much in style and theme with the nonfiction, have overshadowed the short stories. Reacting against the realistic and naturalistic fiction of her time, Woolf often emphasized lyricism, stream of consciousness, and the irresolute slice of life in both her novels and her stories, though she wrote more conventional fiction as well. Whether the conventional "well-made" or the experimental stream-of-consciousness variety, many of her approximately fifty short stories are accomplished works of art. Because of their precise and musical prose style, irony, ingenious spiral form (with narrative refrains), reversal or revelatory structure, and exploration of human nature and social life, they deserve to be better known and to be studied for themselves and not just for what they may reveal about the novels.

3.0. Achievements in Other Literary Forms

To say that Virginia Woolf lived to write is no exaggeration. Her output was both prodigious and varied; counting her posthumously published works, it fills more than forty volumes. Beyond her novels, her fiction encompasses several short-story collections. As a writer of nonfiction, Woolf was similarly prolific, her book-length works including *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) and two influential feminist statements, “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) and “Three Guineas” (1938). Throughout her life, Woolf also produced criticism and reviews; the best-known collections are “The Common Reader: First Series” (1925) and “The Common Reader: Second Series” (1932). In 1966 and 1967, the four volumes of *Collected Essays* were published. Additional books of essays, reviews, and sketches continue to appear, most notably the illuminating selection of autobiographical materials, “Moments of Being” (1976). Her letters — 3,800 of them survive — are available in six volumes; when publication was completed, her diaries stood at five. Another collection, of Woolf’s essays, also proved a massive, multivolume undertaking.

Virginia Woolf had her own original vision of life and she has ever remained truthful to her vision. And this truthfulness and this artistic integrity is due to her perfect detachment from all personal prejudices and preconceived notions or from any personal end. Literary traditions and conventions, or social and political problems of the day — nothing could deter her from writing according to her vision, according to the ideal which exists in her mind with uncommon artistic sincerity and integrity. And then Mrs. Woolf was a ‘naturalist’ as well as a contemplative’. In the words of Bernard Blackstone, “She observes new facts, and old facts in a new way; but she also combines them, through the contemplative act, into new and strange patterns. The outer is not only related to, it is absorbed into the inner life. Mrs. Woolf believed in the power of the mind and so she makes her reader think.”

We have already discussed in detail Mrs. Woolf’s aestheticism. The significant thing about her is that there is nothing languid or academic about her aestheticism. She could find beauty ‘as much in a scrap of orange peel lying in the gutter as in the Venus de Milo’ She was a great lover of beauty and this love of beauty guides her in her selection and ordering of reality.

4.0. No Element of Story. Rendering of Inner Reality

As Virginia Woolf broke free from tradition, she had also to discard the current form of the novel. But then she was driven to invent her own technique which would express her own vision of life. And Mrs. Woolf had already expressed very strongly that if the novelist 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’. Hence in most of her novels there is hardly any element of story. Mrs. Woolf’s formula for the novel was not humanity in action but in a state of infinite perception. The novel in her hands is not just an entertainment, or propaganda, or the vehicle of some fixed ideas or theories, or a social document, but a voyage of exploration to find out how life is lived, and how it can be rendered as it is actually lived without distortion. Hence she concentrates her attention on the rendering of inner reality and gives subtle and penetrating inlets into the consciousness of her characters. She cares very little for narrating dramatic events.

5.0. The World of Outer Reality Is Not Ignored

It is to be noted that because her main purpose as a novelist is to depict inner life of human beings, she has not ignored the world of outer reality, the warm and palpable life of nature. In fact, in her novels we find that the metaphysical interest is embodied in purely human and personal terms, that the bounding line of art remains unbroken, that the concrete images which are the very stuff of art are never sacrificed to abstraction, but are indeed more in evidence than in the work of such writers as Bennett and Wells. The essential subject matter of her novels is no doubt the consciousness of one or more characters, but the outer life of tree and stream, of bird and fish, of meadow and seashore crowds in upon her and lends her image after image, a great, sparkling and many-coloured world of sight and scent and sound and touch. Herein lies the magic and miracle of her work.

6.0. Emergence of an Art Form

In Virginia Woolf’s novels we find a rare artistic integrity and they display a well-developed sense of form. To communicate her experience, she had to invent conventions as rigid or more rigid than the old ones that she discarded. And this she does in her best novels of the middle and the final period — “Mrs. Dalloway”, “To The Lighthouse”, “The Waves and Between the Acts”. In each case a small group of people is selected, and through their closely interrelated experience the reader receives his total impression. We also find that in each case certain images, phrases and symbols bind the whole together. So there are certain resemblances between them in structure or style. Apart from these general resemblances each of these novels is a fresh attempt to solve the problems raised by the departure from traditional conventions. So it is observed that each of her novels grows out of the preceding one and we see the germ of her later works in their predecessors. Another significant point is that in Mrs. Woolf’s novels from “Jacob’s Rooms” to “The

Waves” there is far less scene-setting and novel of it is obvious; deliberate stage managing disappears, in fact concealed; hence the method is poetic, the unity is a poetic unity. But the unity is there and is deliberately achieved.

7.0. Poetization of the English Novel

One of the most outstanding achievements of Virginia Woolf is that she represents the poetization and musicalisation of English novel. Among the English novelists she is foremost in lyrical technique. She sets out on a quest for a mediating form through which she could convey simultaneously picture of life and manners and a corresponding image of minds. She aimed at conveying inner life and this could be best done in a lyrical manner. Hence it is found that in order to enrich her language, she used vivid metaphors and symbols which are peculiar to poetry. Her language is the language of poetry, her prose style has the assonances, the refrains, the rhythms and the accents of poetry itself. Virginia Woolf’s lyrical narrative is based on a design on which various contents of consciousness are juxtaposed. The equilibrium between the lyrical and narrative art shows how Virginia Woolf brilliantly achieves the telescoping of the poet’s lyrical self and the novelist’s omniscient point of view. It is a case of unified sensibility, that is, a blending of the objective and the subjective, which is considered to be the best form of poetry particularly in modern poetry. Virginia Woolf’s “To The Lighthouse” shows her lyricism in a superb manner and *Time Passes*, the second part of this novel, has been described by the novelist herself as particularly representative of her lyric vein.

8.0. The Interior Monologue. Stream of Consciousness Technique

To the novelists of the new school human consciousness is a chaotic welter of sensations and impressions; it is fleeting, trivial and evanescent. And according to Virginia Woolf, the great task of the novelist should be ‘to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit’. His main business is just to reveal the sensations and impressions to bring us close to the quick of the mind. He should be more concerned with inner reality rather than outer. This is what is known as ‘the stream of consciousness technique’. And we are introduced into interior life of a character by means of interior monologue. There is very little intervention in the way of explanation or commentary on the part of the novelist. And this has been done by Virginia Woolf by a very skilful use of ‘the interior monologue’ or ‘the stream of consciousness’ technique. She has very successfully revealed the very spring of action, the hidden motives which impel men and women to act in a particular way. She has been able to take us directly into the minds of her characters and show the flow of ideas, sensations and impressions there. And thus Mrs. Woolf has been able to create a number of memorable, many-sided and rounded figures, such as Mrs. Ramsay or Mrs. Dalloway, which are among the immortals of literature.

9.0. Woman’s Point of View. Feminisation of English Novel

It would have to be accepted that Virginia Woolf was a woman and naturally in her novels she gives us the woman’s point of view. That is why we find her relying more on intuition than on reason. We also find in her a woman’s dislike for the world of societies churches, banks and schools and the political, social and economic movements of the day have hardly any attraction for her. As a sheltered female of her age she had hardly any scope to have any knowledge of the sordid and brutal aspects of life. Thus we find that her picture of life does not include vice, sordidness or the abject brutality of our age. So it may be inferred that Mrs. Woolf thus represents the feminisation of the English novel.

10. Conclusion

Virginia Woolf’s greatest achievement is that in her novels the stream of consciousness technique finds a balance. She knew that art required a selection and ordering of material. Hence her work has a rare artistic integrity. In fact, she wonderfully succeeded in imposing form and order on the chaos inherent in the novel of subjectivity or ‘the stream of consciousness’ novel. And it was Mrs. Woolf who was also one of the most forceful and original theorists of ‘the stream of consciousness’ novel, and be her exposition of aesthetics of this kind of novel, she did much to throw light on its technique, and to bring out its superiority to the conventional novel.

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