

**VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL: A PIONEERING
ACHIEVEMENT IN LITERARY TECHNIQUE**

By

Jafar Marwan Irshaidat

Supervisor

Dr. Mohammad Shaheen, Prof.

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Examination Committee

Signature

Prof. Mohammad Shaheen (Supervisor)
Professor of English Language and Literature

Dr. Samira Al Khawaldeh (Member)
Head of the English Language Department

Prof. Ahmad Y. Majdoubeh (Member)
Dean of the Faculty of Arts

Dr. Wafa Al-Khadra (Member)
Head of the English Language Department
(Al – Ahliyya Amman Univeristy)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to emphasize the achievement of Virginia Woolf as an experimentalist, to reveal the inner workings of her experimentation and its repercussions on the English novel as a whole. Over the last century, Woolf has been studied primarily as a model modernist. The purpose of this study is to show that her experimentation, and the resultant works of this experimentation, place her in a context far beyond that of modernism; what will be referred to as the “Woolfian” context throughout this research.

It is important to note that though we have placed Woolf beyond modernism, the context within which we are trying place her is not, as would be the most logical deduction, in the post-modern context, or at least within its imposed tenets. This study is merely trying to liberate Woolf’s work from the scholarly burdens that had been heaped upon it since its publication, and the term “Woolfian” aptly fits the characteristics, impressions and contributions we are trying to identify.

The research will begin by analyzing Woolf’s own criticisms of the traditional novel – what she deemed as the work of “materialists” – in order to reveal to the reader what Woolf saw literature should *not* be. The second portion of the research will analyze the writing styles of writers praised by Woolf in her criticism, giving the

reader a conceptual framework of Woolf's literary vision, and allowing for a comparative reference when attempting to isolate Woolf's achievement. The final portion of the research will then attempt to reveal Woolf's experimentalism and show, by means of deconstruction and comparison, that her achievement is indeed a pioneering achievement and, more importantly, one that worthy of a class of its own.

Introduction

In an age where literary inventiveness has almost given way to reproduction, it becomes crucial for literary critics to revisit time periods during which the art of writing underwent substantial transformations, and to re-examine the works of the rather few pioneers in the history of literature who truly “experimented” in their writing. One such time period (if not the most notable) was in the early 20th century, during which the adherents of so-called modernism were looking to revolutionize the very definitions of art and, in the words of Ezra Pound, to “make it new” (Pound, p. 704) It was during that period in literary history that the English writer Virginia Woolf set out to reinvent literary technique, and, since then, the English language has seen fewer and fewer attempts that were equally substantial and successful.

What is meant by “experimentation” in this context is the author’s prioritization of originality over productivity, a prioritization which entails delving beyond conventions even at the expense of a large readership. In her fiction, Virginia Woolf seldom revisited literature, often aiming to reinvent it in every one of her fictions. Her entire literary legacy has been about rectifying the flaws she felt riddled the literature of the traditional novelists. Yet what is even more astonishing to the reader is how she herself sought to outdo her own work, never repeating the same kind of experimentation twice.

What sets Virginia Woolf aside is that, unlike most experimentalists, her experimentation was not a *result* of her writing but rather its driving force. Not only did she strive to achieve novelty in every one of her works, but she also never created two works with the same brand of newness (Mephram, p. xiv). This makes the reintroduction of her contribution a vital task on behalf of researchers and scholars alike. It is hoped that this research will shed light on this very act of experimentation as a pillar to literary innovation; the absence of which can eventually lead to a literary stalemate, signs of which we are beginning to see in our day and age. As Émile Zola believes, “[s]ome observed fact makes the idea start up of trying an experiment, of writing a novel, in order to attain a complete knowledge of the truth” (Zola, p. 12). What Zola is attempting to express, which Virginia Woolf has aptly put into practice

in her work, is that human truth, in its broadest and most abstract sense, is contingent upon experimentation, and that a literary work seldom contributes to the collective human experience if it lacks experimentation.

Another unique quality in Woolf's experimentation is its freedom; never was her writing restricted to her own experiments in life. In fact, in light of the social fetters of her time, and her deteriorating mental condition, what Woolf experienced in life was fairly minimal when compared to her artistic rendering of it (Moody, p. 6). This was one of the reasons behind her unceasing capacity for writing. This not only attests to Woolf's calibre as an experimental writer, but to experimentation itself; it serves to show how, unlike many other forms of experimentation, literary experimentation is limitless in its contribution to human truth.

Woolf launched a relentless revolution against the traditional novel. In her criticism, she felt that the traditional novel failed to capture life in its real form, focusing on the material aspects whilst ignoring that which really matters to us as humans; what she termed the "spirit" or "truth." In her most renowned critical essay on the subject, "Modern Fiction," she often broaches issues that pertain to the very essence of human existence: the meaning of life; the infinite particles of thought of that fall upon the mind from a place unknown; the endless impressions one receives from passing one's eyes upon a work of art (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, pp. 152-3).

The problem with Virginia Woolf is that her work, much like her own character, is predominantly bipolar, meaning that the critical consensus – particularly with regards to her contribution to the English language and literature – is a matter of controversy. This could be a hindrance for the reader when attempting to put Woolf's work in context. The primary challenge would be to develop a framework for analysis; to determine what constitutes an experimental novel, the nature of the experiment and how it contributes to English language and literature as a whole.

A considerable number of critics, particularly those of her own generation, view Woolf's work as ultimately inferior in its contribution, lacking in universality and depth, and ultimately devoid of the power to convey anything of emotional or ethical significance to the common reader. The reasons for such views are numerous, and the

reader will come to see through this research that these opinions are much more a reaction to Woolf's critical opinions than to her writing. Yet Woolf's writing, in its bold abandonment of plot and its almost religious devotion to narrative form, faced much rejection by countless critics, for, in the words of George Lukacs, it represented the "rejection of narrative objectivity, [and] the surrender to subjectivity" (Lukacs, p. 96). It is therefore that the reader might be marooned amidst the clashing viewpoints of critics who either failed to comprehend the contribution brought forth by the writings of Woolf and similar writers, or those who have completely rejected it for exterior motives.

This study aims to emphasize, by performing an entirely updated rereading, the experimental aspects of Woolf's achievement, and to prove that her experimentation stretches far beyond the context of modernism within which she has been confined to date. Essentially, what the research endeavours to establish is that Woolf has created a new, self-sustaining genre, what will be referred to hereafter in this research as the "Woolfian" novel. This sheds light on the greater problem of placing Woolf herself in context amidst the plethora of experimental novelists; for though she is scholarly considered a forerunner of the modernist movement, she is notorious for her dislike of a number of writers affiliated with the movement. The problem here lies in showing the reader how the modernist definition of experimental literature and Woolf's definition of it are quite different.

The key to overcoming this problem is to let the entire process of framework development take place within the parameters set forth by Woolf herself in her theoretical writing. Therefore, the study has been segmented into three chapters. The first chapter, titled "The Traditional 'Material' Novel" will attempt to establish what Woolf was *not* by analyzing, through her own brand of criticism, the flaws she perceived in the traditional novel, namely the novels of the Edwardian patriarchs mentioned in "Modern Fiction." The second chapter, "The Rise of Modernisms" will highlight the evolution of the novel under the hands of the modernists. This will establish the context within which Woolf has been placed, and will also create a comparative reference that paves the way for the third chapter, "The Experimental 'Woolfian' Novel" which will attempt to bring to light Woolf's pioneering accomplishment as a writer.

Chapter One

The Traditional “Materialist” Novel

We mean by [materialists] 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. (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, p. 153)

This statement from “Modern Fiction” bears not only substantial implications on the very definition of literature, but on the validity of collective human thought as well. Woolf’s dissatisfaction with the writers of the period preceding her own is as much a criticism of their approach to life in its entirety as it is of the way they choose to depict that life in their writing. The infraction committed by these materialists – these traditional novelists – is not merely that they write of trivial things but that their brand of fiction trivializes the human experiences it narrates – that life simply “escapes” their art (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, p.153). “Modern Fiction” presents a concise yet detailed criticism of a literary tradition revered by many in the literary community – common readers included – until the present day.

Still, to the common reader (who is, by Woolf’s own admission, her most cherished of all readers) (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, p.1) the category of “materialists” is somewhat cryptic. In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf names three prime suspects in what she referred to as the “assault” committed against the English language: Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and John Galsworthy – all of whom are critically considered vanguards of the Edwardian tradition. (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, p. 151) One might conclude, then, that traditionalism, materialism and Edwardianism are – in Woolf’s eyes at least – synonymous; different titles for the same band of brothers who, in her own words, “have left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, and marches, if only to the desert, the better for its soul” (Ibid.). Yet this assumption is a leap, one that is made by Woolf herself at several instances and one that is also ultimately incorrect. Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy, while being pillars of the Edwardian movement, do not represent its entirety. Edwardianism hauls a hefty sum of writers who have given much to the English language, and good examples of

those are Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster, both of whom have had great influence on Woolf as a writer.

Yet the magnitude of the concept itself – that a then-developing writer would openly criticize older, more prominent writers with panache, and further gaining the support of many writers and critics of her generation – has managed to blur the critical core of this particular debate, resulting in a public spectacle that is ultimately more personal than it is scholarly. The critical quarrel between Woolf and these Edwardian patriarchs lasted more than a decade, and for a critic to read “Modern Fiction” without performing the due diligence of consulting the plethora of other critical essays that deal with the transition between the traditional and the experimental novel is an open invitation to fallacy. The reader, then, must follow the debacle since its beginning, which is believed by critics to be April 1919 – the day the essay “Modern Fiction” was first published in the *TLS* (at the time it was an early draft titled “Modern Novels” (Hynes, pp. 34-44).

In order to understand this transition, “Modern Fiction,” “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” and her numerable other critical essays, letters and journal entries need to be placed in context, and a clear understanding of Woolf’s critical perspectives must be formed. Thus far, the bulk of the scholarly research on Woolf has been devoted to her as a writer; as a critic, she is seldom discussed thoroughly, and is often lumped into one of several categories of aesthetic, feminist, formalist or modernist criticism. In fact, Woolf’s reputation as a critic has always been in question amongst critics. In his assessment of Woolf as an essayist, Horace Gregory writes:

In her essays she was a mistress of what often has been called an "outmoded" form, and if one admits that the familiar essay was among the vehicles of her genius, one need not concern one's self too deeply over the question of her ability in literary criticism. She was not, I believe, vastly disturbed by problems of the intellect, and because she was not one may find one of the several reasons for her lack of ease in the presence of Coleridge. She exerted an influence in literary matters because her artistry embraced the arts of persuasion and of charm. It is only when her criticism appears to be incidental to the portrait of a literary figure that it becomes convincing to the eye, and when the portrait is lacking, and when the criticism takes the form of a set argument, the illumination fades,

the walls of the library are blank and we hear only the ringing of her small bells.
(Gregory, p. 192)

Diana Trilling paints a bleaker picture of Woolf as a critic in her article "Virginia Woolf's Special Realm," saying that

It has often been remarked of Virginia Woolf that she was a commentator on literature rather than a critic, more an antiquarian than a literary analyst. Now, as we read not only the old essays with which we are already familiar but also the majority of the new ones in 'The Moment,' the judgment is firmly supported. There is no question but that Mrs. Woolf was at her best, and that her best was superlative of its kind, when she was dealing with little-known figures of the past whom she could re-create out of scraps of letters and journal, out of a remembered morsel of talk here and a flash of scene there, rather than when she attempted to take the full meaning of the work of an established author (p.89).

The image of a literary "commentator" would plague Woolf throughout her entire career (Goldman, 276). Still, she never took those attacks humbly. In her essay "How it Strikes a Contemporary," Woolf makes a profound statement about the situation of literary critics in her time:

A great critic, they say, is the rarest of beings. But should one miraculously appear, how should we maintain him, on what should we feed him? Great critics, if they are not themselves great poets, are bred from the profusion of the age. . But our age is meagre to the verge of destitution. There is no name which dominates the rest. There is no master in whose workshop the young are proud to serve apprenticeship. (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, p.239).

The statement in isolation scrapes many a surface, yet it speaks volumes when placed in historical context. In the beginning of the essay, Woolf expresses her exasperation at contemporary critics; how "two critics at the same table at the same moment will pronounce completely different opinions about the same book. Here, on the right, it is declared a masterpiece of English prose; on the left, simultaneously, a mere mass of wastepaper which, if the fire could survive it, should be thrown upon the flames" (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, p. 236). Yet, she reiterates, "both critics are in agreement about Milton and about Milton and about Keats" (Ibid).

Essentially, then, Woolf sees that contemporary criticism has abolished all points of reference. Reading these lines we cannot help but see the contemporary critic as a clueless enthusiast floundering in a sea of literary produce whilst being unable to decide on their literary merits. She further explains that once upon a time there existed a certain discipline – a bar, against which all art was measured, one that is lacking in modern times. This vision is no mere revolt against reader-response. This irresolution in the literary arena of her age is a quality present throughout her critical heritage. In “Modern Fiction,” she writes:

We [contemporaries] 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 sad that we make no claim to stand, even momentarily, upon that vantage ground. (Woolf, *Common* Vol.1, p.150)

This decadence in literature was to become a theme in her criticism for decades. As one plows through the intricate meshes of her essays, one cannot help but witness an incessant urge in her criticism to thrust literature forward: as if she herself, with great enthusiasm, tills through the stacks of new publications looking for a certain missing element, only to be constantly disappointed. Furthermore, it becomes quite evident that her criticism collectively attempts to redefine the “discipline” she felt had vanished between the grips of the contemporaries. Yet, the reader is bound to ask, what is this Woolfian discipline?

1.1. “Woolfian” Criticism

Assorting the critical approaches of Virginia Woolf into one clear set of tenets is undoubtedly an arduous task. If one reads the entirety of her critical essays, or only those relevant to the transformation from the traditional to the modern, or, in the case of this study, the Woolfian, one will be baffled by the extent to which the abstractionist ideas contained within them are broad and evasive. Yet the reader could, by deconstruction, achieve a clearly defined conceptual framework within which further analysis can be contained without confusion. A good deconstructive

approach is to analyze the various schools of thought that contributed to Woolf's critical approach; primarily, to analyze which of their elements, if any, affect Woolf's view of literature. This will give the reader a clearer idea of Woolf's approach to reading *and* to writing novels (in this chapter, our only concern is the first; the latter will be discussed thoroughly in Chapter Three).

1.1.1. Aesthetic Reading

In his essay on Winckelmann, Walter Pater writes:

What modern art has to do in the service of culture, is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom. ... The chief factor in the thoughts of the modern mind concerning itself is the intricacy, the universality of natural law, even in the moral order. (Watkins, pp. 430).

Not only can the above passage be regarded as a definitive precursor of the Aesthetic Movement, yet it can also serve to show how the movement itself affected Woolf's definition of art. Whether in her essays, letters, or diary, the importance of pictorial art in Woolf's life cannot be overemphasized by anyone looking to understand her mind's eye. Her closely-knit circle of associates hulled a considerable number of artists, including Roger Frye and Vanessa and Clive Bell, all of whom are ardent adherents of aestheticism. Yet to Woolf, art in the pictorial form never stood on its own. In fact, pictorial art was only so in the sense that it spoke to the writer within her:

I see why I like pictures; it's as things that stir me to describe them . . . I insist (for the sake of my aesthetic soul) that I don't want to read stories or emotions or anything of the kind into them; only pictures that appeal to my plastic sense of words make me want to have them for still life in my novel. (Bell, p.168)

On Woolf's reading of literary texts, Mark Schorer writes:

Virginia Woolf approached her reading, in her criticism, as she approached the whole of experience in her novels: with aggressive curiosity, a refined sensibility, but an exaggerated sense of the relevance of impression. . . .What is lacking, finally, is the sense of value. (Schorer, p. 379)

Regardless of what Schorer thought of her sense of value, it is his citing of her attention to “impression” that is significant. Woolf’s fascination with the impressionists’ art, to which she had been repeatedly exposed as a fledgling writer, is very well documented. Yet it is not her fascination with impressionist art that concerns us here, but rather how, in her reading of literary texts, she sought the same emotional high she received from that instantaneous cessation that is characteristic of impressionist paintings.

In her essay “How Should One Read a Book?” Woolf explains how a good critic can form judgment upon a literary text without prejudice. The reader, she says, should begin by purifying his mind of all preconceptions, thus clearing the stage for “impressions” to come (*Common Reader Second Series*, p. 67). She regards the core of analysis to be comparison, the points of reference being works that have previously imparted positive impressions upon the psyche, which indicates that the act of criticism is done predominantly on a subconscious level. Yet this is only half of the critical cycle, and Woolf continues to describe that “the first process, to receive impressions with the utmost understanding, is only half the process of reading; it must be completed, if we are to get the whole pleasure from a book, by another. We must pass judgment upon these multitudinous impressions; we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting” (*Common Reader Second Series*, p. 67).

When it first began in the 1860s, the Aesthetic Movement was fairly simple, essentially attempting to echo John Keats’ “truth is beauty, and beauty is truth” (Keats, 221). The movement found solace in the Romantic view of life, shunning the fetters that the utilitarian philistines placed upon art in their incessant demands that it must contain some moral or concrete value. The aesthetes disdained didactics as a concept, never attaching any premeditation to their art: it only needed beauty to reflect truth. The utilitarian point of view (which, one comes to see, is inherent in the Victorian and the later Edwardian one as well) is that art should mimic the natural

world, and it is that mimesis which contains its value. The aesthetes' rebuttal can be summarized in the following passage taken from Oscar Wilde's *Intentions*:

For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence...Even those who hold that Art is representative of time and place and people cannot help admitting that the more imitative an art is, the less it represents to us the spirit of its age. (Wilde, p. 919)

In a sense, the task of the artist is to reinvent life and the natural world, which are often characterized as crude and meaningless without artistic intervention. Quite often, art for the aesthetes cannot be segmented into forms; there can never be a single work of art, or a single "kind" of art. A picture cannot stand on its own, and neither can a text or a musical tune. To the aesthetes, the quintessence of art, which they aptly called "beauty," is unchanging, and quite often these various forms of art depend on and borrow from one another to reflect it (Vargish et al, p. 109). In a letter addressed to Jacques Raverat, Woolf lamented the separation she so often encountered between the arts, and more specifically between the pictorial and the written: "We [she wrote] are so lonely and separated in our adventures as writers and painters" (Nicholson et al, p. 41).

One can safely conclude, then, that a good writer is one who can use the written word to communicate an idea with the same vibrancy and clarity as an artist does in his colours: "painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see" (Woolf, *Essays*, p. 241). Woolf's relationship with the artists in her circle – particularly that with Roger Fry – had a substantial impact on the way she viewed literature. Frequently, she and Fry would have discussions on their respective crafts and seek common grounds in their views of art as a collective concept: "We discussed literature and aesthetics," she wrote in one entry of her diary (Bell, p. 80). "We discuss prose; and as usual some book is handed out, and I have to read a passage over his shoulder. Theories are fabricated. Pictures stood on chairs" (Ibid, p. 225).

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Final Committee Decision. Once you have completed the application form, handed in the documentation, and passed the personal interview, your application, together with a report from your interviewer, is reviewed by the university's Admissions Committee. The Admissions Committee is made up of university staff members who will jointly assess your suitability as a candidate. You will be informed of the Admissions Committee's decision in writing. If accepted, you will receive one of two admission statuses Major business decisions require careful analysis, detailed research, a plan of implementation, an evaluation protocol, and a clear set of objectives. Unfortunately, many business decisions lack some of these key elements. Mistakes are made. Sometimes very costly mistakes. In some small businesses, decisions are often made by top-tier management. In really small companies, everyone may be encouraged to offer their opinion. Decision : 39 COM 7A.27 Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls (site proposed by Jordan) (C 148 rev). The World Heritage Committee, Having examined Document WHC-15/39.COM/7A.Add, Recalling the relevant provisions on the protection of cultural heritage