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VIRGINIA WOOLF'S AESTHETIC VIEWS AND THE CONCEPTION OF MODERNIST PROSE

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Annotation: This article provides a broad analysis of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic views and the formation of her conception of modernist prose. Her manifesto-articles "Modern Fiction" (1925) and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923), which constitute the theoretical foundation of Woolf's work, are analyzed, and their connection with her artistic practice is shown. Woolf's critique of Edwardian fiction, her concept of inner reality and "moments of being," as well as the influences of Bergson, James, and Roger Fry, are examined. The study evaluates Woolf's aesthetic conception within the context of English modernism and demonstrates its artistic expression in her novels "Mrs Dalloway" and "To the Lighthouse."

Keywords: modernist aesthetics, inner reality, moments of being, stream of consciousness, critique of Edwardian fiction, modernist prose, the Bloomsbury group.

Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic views and the formation of her modernist prose conception. The theoretical foundations of Woolf's creative work are examined through her manifestos "Modern Fiction" (1925) and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923). The study explores Woolf's critique of Edwardian fiction, her concept of "moments of being" and inner reality, and the influences of Bergson, James, and Roger Fry. The research evaluates Woolf's aesthetic conception within the context of English modernism and demonstrates its artistic realization in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse.

Keywords: modernist aesthetics, inner reality, moments of being, stream of consciousness, critique of Edwardian fiction, modernist prose, Bloomsbury group.

1. Introduction

As the leading representative of the modernist movement in twentieth-century English literature, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) occupies a special place in world literary scholarship as a writer who radically renewed the art of narrative. The First World War, and the subsequent crisis of traditional values in Britain together with the formation of a new worldview, created the ground for profound changes in literature as well. It was precisely in this socio-cultural environment that Woolf, in concert with the members of the Bloomsbury group, defined a new aesthetic direction and brought a modernist breath into the English novel (Lee, 1996, p. 23).

In her novels, the traditional structure of plot and event recede into the background, and the inner world of the human being, the stream of consciousness, and psychological experiences are raised to the center of artistic depiction. The distinctive features of Woolf's work—the subjective perception of time, the poetic synthesis of memory and the present, and the multiple-point-of-view technique set a new artistic standard in English modernism. Her novels “Mrs Dalloway” (1925)

and “To the Lighthouse” (1927) are being widely researched in world literary scholarship as the most vivid examples of this new poetics (Goldman, 2006, p. 12).

The relevance of the topic lies in the fact that Woolf's aesthetic views directly determined her artistic practice; she not only wrote novels but also formulated the theoretical foundations of modernist prose. Her articles “Modern Fiction” and “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” retain their significance in literary scholarship as the programmatic documents of English modernism. The aim of this study is to analyze Woolf's aesthetic conception from the standpoint of the relationship among her philosophical sources, her polemical articles, and her artistic practice.

To fully grasp Woolf's modernist aesthetics, it is first necessary to understand the traditional model of the novel that she criticized. The Victorian and Edwardian tradition that prevailed in the English novel from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century is characterized by a number of distinctive features.

Victorian fiction (Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot) is distinguished by a strong plot, precise chronology, the depiction of social problems, and moral didacticism. In this tradition the protagonist is characterized in relation to his environment—class structure, family, society. The author, occupying an omniscient (all-knowing) position, comments on the characters' actions and draws conclusions for the reader. In Daniel Schwarz's words, the modernists "sought to find an aesthetic order or a historical pattern in place of the collapse of past values" (Schwarz, 1989, p. 3).

The Edwardian novelists (Edwardian novelists—English writers who created during the reign of King Edward VII (1901–1910) and in the years somewhat after.) Arnold Bennett, Herbert Wells, and John Galsworthy, as continuers of this same tradition, became the principal object of Woolf's criticism. They depicted external reality in detail—housing, property, social status, clothing—while leaving the protagonist's inner world out of consideration. According to Woolf, although such novels appear to depict life, they lose hold of the inner reality that is the essence of life.

It may be said that, on the one hand, the Edwardian approach in this period was very precise and detailed. For example, Bennett depicted urban life down to the millimetre, and Wells viewed social issues with a realist eye. But for Woolf this was a "materialistic" approach—that is, they portrayed the human being through external attributes and left the inner life feel‘ings, memories, inner monologues unattended.

Main Body

Woolf's article “Modern Fiction” was published in 1919 under the title “Modern Novels” in the Times Literary Supplement, and in 1925, in a revised form, was included in the collection “The Common Reader”. This article occupies a special place in literary scholarship as one of the programmatic documents of English modernism.

The main thesis of the article is that the Edwardian novelists—Bennett, Wells, Galsworthy—were "materialists" who, while depicting the external appearance of life, lost hold of its essence (Woolf, 1925, p. 146). Describing them with this characterization, Woolf criticizes the fact that in their works it is not the human soul but rather the human being's house, clothing, and profession that are shown.the human soul, but rather the human being's house, clothing, and profession that are shown.

For Woolf, true literature must express the human consciousness—its scattered, fragmentary thoughts that flow in an associative manner—and she offers her famous metaphor that life is an "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" (Woolf, 1925, p. 148). To capture these atoms, these tiny, fleeting, elusive moments on paper, is the task of the new novelists.

In the article Woolf gives particular emphasis to Joyce's work. According to her, in “Uliss”, although it may seem strange and even frightening to the reader, Joyce attempted to express the inner life of the human being most profoundly. While Woolf does not fully accept Joyce's method, she supports his central idea—the necessity of depicting the stream of consciousness (Woolf, 1925, p. 150).

In her view, in the new novel it is not plot but the stream of consciousness, not event but perception, not chronology but psychological time that must prevail. This is the essence of Woolf's central doctrine in “Modern Fictio”". She writes: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf, 1925, p. 150). This aesthetic conviction—that life is something disordered, elusive, trembling like a delicate light—may be said to have served as a compass for all of Woolf's creative labour.

If “Modern Fiction” is Woolf's general aesthetic programme, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” becomes her specific polemical document. This article was written in 1923 in response to Arnold Bennett's criticism of Woolf's novel “Jacob’s Room”. In that article, Bennett had declared: "The characters of Woolf's novel are unable to find their place in life," (Bennett, 1923, p. 47).

Woolf, in turn, refuted this criticism and proved that the Edwardian novelists themselves had failed in creating character. She builds her argument through a concrete example—how should the novelists have depicted an imagined “Mrs Brown”, an ordinary old woman sitting near a guardhouse? The Edwardian novelist depicts her house, her economic condition, her social class, while leaving the woman's inner world, her memories, and her feelings unattended (Woolf, 1924, p. 4).

Woolf's main argument is that, in order to depict character, the Edwardian novelists use “tools and instruments” that is, the social, economic, and historical context—but these instruments cannot reveal the essence of “Mrs Brown” (Woolf, 1924, p. 8). The true character is not a collection of external circumstances but an image that lives in its own consciousness, that exists in its own memories and feelings.

In the article Woolf also advances an important historical observation: "In December 1910 everything around changed," she writes (Woolf, 1924, p. 10). This date is interpreted by Woolf as the starting point of a new aesthetic thinking. For it was precisely in that year that the post-impressionist exhibition organized by Roger Fry in London opened. This exhibition shaped new ways of perceiving art and life in the English intellectual and cultural environment and gave a strong impetus to the development of modernist aesthetic views.

In the conclusion of the article Woolf precisely defines the task of the modern novelist: "We are writing bad novels, but we write them knowingly, because we are trying to capture Mrs Brown," (Woolf, 1924, p. 16). This statement expresses the essence of Woolf's entire aesthetic programme in a single sentence—that capturing the protagonist's consciousness, his inner reality, is the principal aim of the modernist novel.

It should be noted that Woolf's aesthetic views constitute a system of a number of theoretical and artistic principles closely interconnected with one another. She set out these views not only through her novels but also consistently in her literary-critical articles, her essays, and her diary "A Writer's Diary." In the writer's view, the task of modernist literature is not so much to depict external reality as to reveal the complex, multi-layered nature of the human consciousness. For this reason her aesthetic conception rests on several fundamental principles that offer a new

interpretation of human perception, the perception of time, and the relationship between artistic form and reality.

While the first principle establishes the necessity of artistically depicting the inner reality within the human consciousness, the second important aspect of Woolf's aesthetics is connected with the apprehension of the most meaningful and profound points of human experience. From this standpoint, the concept of "moments of being" acquires particular significance in her work. Woolf develops this idea in "A Writer's Diary" and in her later autobiographical essays. According to her, the greater part of human life passes in a state of "non-being"—that is, in the course of habitual and automatic activity. Yet at certain moments the true essence of reality is unexpectedly revealed, and the human being perceives it at a deep emotional-intellectual level (Woolf, 1953, p. 72). It is these moments that become the central object of artistic depiction in Woolf's novels.

The third principle of Woolf's aesthetic conception is connected with the mechanism by which the human consciousness perceives time. For the writer, time is not a chronological sequence determined by the external world but a subjective experience that unfolds within consciousness. For this reason, in her novels the development of events is subordinated not to calendar or clock time but to the inner rhythm of the protagonist's memory, associations, and psychic experiences. This approach shares common ground with Henri Bergson's theory of duree (inner duration) and with William James's views on the stream of consciousness (Bergson, 1889, p. 75; James, 1890, p. 239). As a result, Woolf creates a new model of artistic time, achieving the possibility of compressing many years of memories and psychic experiences within a short span of time.

Just as these principles demanded a new interpretation of artistic content, they also required an entirely new aesthetic form to express it. For this reason, the fourth principle of Woolf's aesthetic views is based on the inseparable unity of form and content. In the writer's view, the complex psychological and spiritual experiences of the new era cannot be fully expressed through traditional novel forms. Under the influence of Roger Fry's aesthetic views, she emphasizes that the formal construction of a work of art is also an active constituent part of its content (Fry, 1920, p. 25). For this reason, in Woolf's novels rhythm, syntactic structure, repetitions, metaphors, and musical harmony appear not merely as stylistic ornament but as important poetic means expressing the movement of the protagonist's consciousness.

The principles examined above constitute the theoretical foundations of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic conception. However, these views were not solely the product of the writer's individual artistic experience. They were formed in close connection with the development of philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic thought in the early twentieth century. Woolf creatively assimilated the most advanced intellectual ideas of her time and brought them to the level of artistic practice. From this standpoint, three important sources acquire particular significance in the formation of her aesthetic conception.

The first source is the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Bergson's theory of time—in particular, his views on the difference between objective clock time and subjective durée (inner duration)—created the philosophical foundation of the model of psychological time in Woolf's novels. In the novel "Mrs Dalloway," the revival of decades of memories during Clarissa's stroll of a few minutes, or the expression of long stretches of years within a short artistic space in the "Time Passes" section of "To the Lighthouse," appears as an artistic interpretation of Bergson's philosophy (Goldman, 2006, p. 58).

The second source is the psychological views of William James. The theory of the "stream of consciousness" advanced by James established the continuous, associative, and dynamic character of human thought. This theory directly influenced Woolf's narrative technique, creating the possibility of depicting the protagonist's consciousness not in a linear and logical sequence but in the form of a free flow of associations. The free movement of Clarissa's consciousness between the

present moment, memory, and imagination from the very first pages of the novel "Mrs Dalloway" is a clear example of this influence (Woolf, 1925, p. 1).

The third source is the aesthetics of Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury group. Roger Fry, known as an art critic and theorist of post-impressionism, exerted a significant influence on Woolf's views on art. According to his concept of "significant form," the aesthetic effect of a work of art is determined not so much by the content of the depicted object as by its manner of formal organization (Fry, 1920, p. 25). This idea found its reflection in Woolf's prose as well, strengthening the aesthetic significance of novel composition, rhythm, syntactic construction, and the system of images. As researchers have noted, the writer was inspired by Fry's aesthetic views in creating the novel "To the Lighthouse" and shaped the work, in a certain sense, as an artistic response to his conception of art (Woolf, 1927, p. 46). Thus Bergson's philosophy of time, James's psychology of consciousness, and Fry's formalist aesthetics constituted the theoretical foundation of Woolf's modernism and gave rise to new interpretations of time, consciousness, and artistic form in her novels.

Woolf's aesthetic views found their full artistic expression in her two most important novels. These novels have been widely researched by literary scholars as a rare harmonious unity of theory and practice.

In the novel "Mrs Dalloway," the aesthetic programme advanced by Virginia Woolf found its most perfect artistic expression. Although the events of the work unfold over the course of a single day, chronological time is pushed into the background, and the main attention is directed to the inner movement of the protagonist's consciousness. At the center of the novel, during Clarissa Dalloway's short stroll along the streets of London, her consciousness moves freely from the present moment toward memories of the past, encompassing several decades of life experience. Thus Woolf realizes in artistic practice the idea, advanced in her article "Modern Fiction," of the "shower of innumerable atoms" that continuously affects the human consciousness. The novel depicts reality not through a sequence of external events but through the continuous flow of perception, memory, and associations.

The writer herself also expressed precisely, in her diary, the aesthetic aims she set before this work. “I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense” (Woolf, 1953, p. 138). This reflection shows that the novel is a complex artistic project aimed at illuminating not only the experience of individual consciousness but also the inner contradictions of contemporary society.

In our view, “To the Lighthous” is the highest peak of Woolf's formal experimentation. The novel consists of three parts: "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse." The "Time Passes" section is a part devoid of a protagonist's consciousness, depicting only space and time—that is, a complete rejection of the traditional narrative model. Here Bergson's duree theory and Fry's formal aesthetics merge, creating an entirely new artistic space. Literary scholars call this section an example of modernist prose's "aerial" style—light as air and profound (Humphrey, 1954, p. 18).

In both novels, free indirect discourse appears as an important linguo-poetic means serving the principal demand of Woolf's aesthetic programme—the direct expression of the inner movement of the protagonist's consciousness. By means of this device, the traditional boundary between the author's speech and the character's speech is significantly effaced, and as a result the reader gains the possibility of perceiving reality not as an external observer but from the inner standpoint of the protagonist's consciousness. In this way, in the novels the consciousness the continuity of the stream, the associations of memory, and the natural dynamics of psychic experiences are recreated in an artistically convincing manner.

As the literary scholar Hermione Lee has noted, Woolf is considered one of the writers who not only shaped new narrative techniques but also prepared the reader for a new aesthetic perception and reading experience (Lee, 1996, p. 472). For this reason her novels demand of the reader not the tracking of a sequence of events but the active apprehension of the complex, multi-layered movement of the protagonist's consciousness.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's aesthetic views and her conception of modernist prose served the formation of a new stage of artistic thought in English literature. Her articles "Modern Fiction" and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" are significant not only as examples of literary polemic but also as theoretical manifestos of modernist aesthetics. The fact that these articles were created before Woolf's principal novels shows that the writer had theoretically substantiated her own creative programme in advance.

Woolf's critique directed at Edwardian fiction redirected literature from the recording of external reality toward the depiction of the complex processes of the human consciousness. This approach, harmonized with Bergson's philosophy of time, James's psychology of consciousness, and Fry's aesthetic views, found its expression in such principles as inner reality, moments of being, psychological time, and the unity of form and content. Thus Woolf, harmonizing her activity as both theorist and creator, created a new model of the poetics of the modernist novel. It is precisely these aspects that created the ground for her aesthetic views to exert a strong influence on the subsequent literary process as well. The artistic principles advanced by Woolf have continued in various forms in the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and have become an important constituent part of contemporary literary thought.

This aesthetic conception, “Mrs Dalloway” and “To the Lighthouse” becoming artistic practice in the novels, established a new standard in twentieth-century English fiction. Psychological time in place of chronological time, inner focalization in place of the omniscient narrator, the stream of consciousness in place of plot—these changes were not merely technical innovation but an entirely new model of perceiving the human being. Woolf saw the reader not as a spectator observing the protagonist from outside but as a companion living together within his consciousness.

Woolf's aesthetic legacy was not confined to her own creative activity but exerted a significant influence on the writers of the following generation and on the development of literary thought. Her poetic explorations aimed at depicting the complex layers of the human consciousness were continued in various forms in the work of such writers as Samuel Beckett, Doris Lessing, and Toni Morrison. At the same time, Virginia Woolf's legacy has not lost its scholarly significance in contemporary literary studies either. In particular, her concept of "moments of being" serves as a productive methodological foundation for new theoretical interpretations within such fields as phenomenology, cognitive poetics, gender studies, and narratology. Thus, while Woolf's aesthetic conception appears on the one hand as an important product of twentieth-century modernist thought, on the other hand it continues an active dialogue with today's literary thought as a universal artistic-philosophical model aimed at understanding the relations among the human consciousness, time, and reality. In this respect, Woolf's aesthetics retains its value not only as a historical-literary phenomenon but also as a relevant theoretical source for contemporary humanitarian thought.

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