

## The Analogous Writer: Literary Evolution in Modernist Virginia

---

Andrew Hall

**"Nothing is to be expected from the workman whose tools are for ever to be sought." – Samuel Johnson (*Think Exist*)**

Virginia Woolf's strong opinions regarding English writing and literature both of the past and her own present can be seen in both her fiction and non-fiction works. In some cases, Woolf's fictional pieces are conscious demonstrations of how the author feels writing should or should not be performed. One such connection can be made between Woolf's non-fiction essay "Modern Fiction" and her short story "Solid Objects." In the former, Woolf addresses what she feels is a necessarily passing era of materialist writing, an aesthetically descriptive style being replaced with the more psychological and character-driven modernist approach. Woolf arguably uses "Solid Objects" to personify her opinion, the story's main politician character functioning analogously as a writer seeking characters fitting Woolf's modernist ideals. The characters in "Solid Objects" are representative of the critical opinions Woolf yields in "Modern Fiction," specifically in terms of stylistic shifts in English writing during Virginia Woolf's time.

"Modern Fiction" sees Woolf analyzing the evolution of British writing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She evaluates the shift from what she refers to as "materialist" writing to a new form bearing the existentialist influences of Russian "moderns," the new form thus called "modernism" (11). For Woolf, the aging materialist writing style is detrimentally heavy on aesthetic detail, concerned "not with the spirit but with the body" (as opposed to modernist writing's emphasis) (7). It is a literary form whose descriptive realism performs at the expense of

realistic human emotion. Woolf critiques the materialist approach by contrasting it with modernism, the then-new form of writing that privileged the reader's emotional investment by emphasizing character interiority. A fictional piece by Woolf, "Solid Objects," is representative of her essay's arguments: in the story, a young politician named John gradually abandons his aspirations in favor of collecting oddly shaped objects. This modernist story is, as per the genre, lacking in traditional narrative structure, most importantly in terms of a conclusive ending (John neither formally quits nor returns to politics). Woolf characterizes John through his introspective collecting, showing the emotional connections he feels towards physical objects rather than purely physical attraction. Furthermore, John's perspective of his objects analogizes him to the modernist writer – his gathered pieces are characters, made humanly interesting in ways that do not rely upon material detail, much as Woolf makes John interesting without overly detailing his physical appearance or career. Indeed his political work takes a backseat to his object collecting as John undergoes transformation of character and, as it were, of writing style.

In "Solid Objects," Woolf opts to illustrate her pro-modernist point by characterizing inanimate items with the depth she feels is lacking in materialist writing. The bulk of the story features John in search of abnormally shaped objects that fascinate him vis-à-vis their irregularities. Both Woolf and John at one point give considerable attention to one particular object: a china dish broken into a star shape. Woolf describes the dish with much detail before John, "determined to possess it," realizes he cannot reach it – "the more he [pushes] it, the further it [recedes]" (57). If John is a writer attempting to characterize this entity properly along Woolf's modernist ideals, then his efforts to grasp the object have up to this

point been too aesthetic, too materialist in focus. It is only after John begins pondering how the piece was “broken into this remarkable shape,” sympathizing with it, that readers can do the same (57). A materialist writer would have stayed focused on the “trivial and the transitory” physical details, keeping the dish (or character) out of reach, denying readers an emotional connection and sending John off to dull work (“Modern Fiction” 8). To Woolf, pre-modernist writers are able to create characters with interesting backgrounds and problems, but do so “without purpose or character” (58). As in life, misfortune happens, and such trials are often what make life, or indeed literature, dynamic and interesting. As such, Woolf seeks to create characters whose scars are situational: John seeks dishes broken in the heat of the moment, thrown with “passionate prejudice” instead of just falling off of a ledge (58). Readers care more if a character is scarred during a quarrel rather than by simply bumping his or her head. This is the human realism that materialist writing lacks due to its overemphasis of the physical. All in all, Woolf feels sympathetic connections cannot be made when materialist writers neglect “the crudity and coarseness of ... human beings” (7-8). An imperfect human character is just as intriguing as an impure object. The opposite of both, though impressive in external detail, does not invite curiosity as to what stories lay within.

John’s fascination with his objects is not about over-describing their superficial appearance; it is about humanizing them. It is about delving into their souls and their character, as Woolf feels a writer should with humans. Woolf cares not for the texture of clothing people wear, any more than John cares about the texture of his found objects – it is more interesting to know: “how do they live, and what ... for?” (“Modern Fiction” 7). A character’s true spirit is found internally, sympathetically,

not easily read in the “ill-fitting vestments” that materialists bind them in (8). John humanizes his found art, characterizing pieces as “alert,” “mute,” “contemplative” (“Solid Objects” 57). The star-dish looks like a “creature from another world,” “pirouetting,” “winking” (57). More than simply objects sitting on a mantelpiece, they are in John’s mind agentive, made far more fascinating when considered as beings with spirit despite physical mundanity. So too does Woolf make John interesting, despite an (intentionally) unexplored life in Parliament. When John is “astonished ... by the immense variety of shapes ... in London,” it is difficult not to imagine Woolf herself “gathering wool” while wandering London, people-watching, sympathizing with so many hypothetical Mrs. Browns (Cuddy-Keane 28 – Woolf, “Solid Objects” 58). Woolf says that the writer “has to have the courage” to redefine his or her interests (“Modern Fiction” 11). Here it is John’s objects, his characters, that fascinate him, that give spiritual life to Woolf’s stories. These objects also become paperweights, holding down connections to his real-world responsibilities. As such, the objects, and thus the characters, are what are needed to make a given story’s “real” world more coherent and accessible. The reader’s attention is kept from floating away, like paper underweight.

As John devalues his real-world concerns, so does Woolf move further from the materialist-era approach of overemphasizing irrelevant things to sympathizing with the character. Analogous to a writer, John moves towards Woolf’s ideal: “If he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not convention,” then the readers would be more emotionally vested in John’s actions rather than adhering to patterns “symmetrically arranged” (“Modern Fiction” 9). To this end, within the story’s context, John and his

friend Charles have differing notions of John's career ambitions. Charles' concern is that John does not have "the ghost of a chance now" in terms of his political aspirations ("Solid Objects" 59). As he neglects his work more and more, John's constituents are theoretically less and less interested in supporting his candidacy. To that end, Woolf's older readers, still conditioned to materialist/pre-modernist writing, are likely not interested in following John's evolving ventures. Victorian-era readers would rather follow the political exploits of an individual character than dwell upon why a piece of green glass makes a man feel the way he does. When Charles looks about the mess of John's workspace, he becomes one of John's (as writer) previous readers, surveying the work of more abstract modernist writers such as James Joyce. If John is Joyce, then by the end he is disregarding "with complete courage whatever seems ... adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence" ("Modern Fiction" 10). He is neglecting the "signposts which ... [serve] to support the imagination of a reader" (10). He is operating incoherently in the eyes of his constituents. Charles describes John's collected objects, his characters, as "pretty stones" ("Solid Objects" 59). They at least stand as well-developed characters amidst a seemingly "difficult or unpleasant" modernist narrative ("Modern Fiction" 10). Though the characters are interesting, the readers are still conditioned to expect narrative cohesion, structure, pattern. When denied that pattern, they "[give] up visiting him" ("Solid Objects" 59).

A potential pitfall for John's transformation is the darker lengths that Woolf knows Russian modernism tends to go to: "the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind ... the sense that there is no answer, that ... life presents question after question ... after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that ill us with ... a resentful, despair" ("Modern Fiction" 12). Woolf does not avoid

modernism because of this darkness—in “Modern Fiction” she critiques materialist predictability (“the destiny ... becomes ... *unquestionably* an eternity of bliss”) (7, my emphasis). John indeed faces indeterminacies: “it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane;” “so definite an object compared with the *vague* sea and the *hazy* shore” (“Solid Objects” 55, my emphasis). Another “question [remains] unanswered” when John tries to understand how two objects “[come] to exist in the same world,” their contrast on his mantelpiece fascinating him (57). Because Woolf places this question in the middle of “Solid Objects,” because the story continues, she thus blends Russian and English styles, moving beyond potential despair towards an at least possible resolution. As John becomes more self-involved, more disconnected from real-world concerns, Woolf anticipates him moving into unanswered despair. But though the story does not end on a conclusive note (as per narrative standards), much less a specifically happy one, readers are left with comfort rather than the “utmost sadness” of Russian modernists (“Modern Fiction” 12). One might expect a more concrete ending to decide whether John will continue his candidacy not – the open ending would leave that unanswered. But John is not left in a lurch of his own transition between responsibility and object-gathering; “I’ve not given it up,” he says; he is positive, content (“Solid Objects” 59). And if Woolf has done a successful job of sympathizing the reader to John’s spirit, then the reader will feel John’s positivity rather than unresolved despair.

John’s transition from politician to analogous writer, to a modernist collector and developer of characters, is narratively incomplete by materialist standards of the previous literary era. But as per Virginia Woolf’s ideals, the transition itself is more important than a completion, the journey more relevant than the destination. John is

deeply, emotionally involved in his search, and the reader then is able to understand his emotion in sympathetic parallel. Woolf does not make the nature of John's journey clear—as with his eventual fate, not everything is certain; not all questions are answered. But if the modernist's character feels no despair in this, then neither should a modernist reader.

#### References

Cuddy-Keane, Melba. *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge UP, 2003. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*.

*Think Exist*. thinkexist.com. Accessed 16 Feb. 2015.

Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." *Selected Essays*, edited by David Bradshaw, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 6-12.

—. "Solid Objects." *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, edited by David Bradshaw, Oxford UP, 2008, pp. 54-9.