

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ESSAYS "MR. BENNET AND MRS. BROWN" AND "MODERN FICTION" - THEIR APPLICATION TO "MRS. DALLOWAY" AND "THE GREAT GATSBY"

Laureta KADRIJAJ QERIMI¹, Besa KRASNIQI²

¹ ALMA MATER EUROPAEA Campus College 'Rezonanca' – Prishtina/Kosovo

² ALMA MATER EUROPAEA Campus College 'Rezonanca'

^{*}Corresponding author e-mail: lkadrijaj@hotmail.com

Abstract:

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Virginia Woolf's essays "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and "Modern Fiction", which critique traditional literary conventions and outline a vision for the development of modernist literature. It further examines how the themes and techniques advocated in these essays are reflected in two prominent novels of the period: Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby". Both novels depart from conventional narrative forms, employing fragmented structures and internal character perspectives to explore themes such as disillusionment, the passage of time, memory, and alienation. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the narrative and thematic innovations that defined the transition into the modernist literary era.

Keywords: modernism, narrative techniques, literary shift, criticism.

1. Introduction

In the early twentieth century, the prominent modernist novelist and critic Virginia Woolf wrote the essays "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" as a response to the dominant literary conventions of her time and as a call for a new approach to novel writing. In these essays, Woolf claims that literature must evolve according to the societal changes, advocating for a narrative style that more genuinely captures the complexities of modern life.

In her 1919 essay 'Modern Fiction', Woolf critiques the narrative techniques employed by her predecessors. As Neelam and Reji (n.d.) observe, "The essay is a criticism of writers and literature from the previous generation. It also acts as a guide for writers of modern fiction to write what they feel, not what society or publisher want them to write."

"*Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*" was written as a polemical response to Arnold Bennett's claim that the novel was in crisis due to the failure of Georgian novelists in the art of "character-making" (Stevic, n.d.). Woolf opposes this view, arguing that "the books written by 'Edwardian' novelists were about life, not literature. She even wonders if their books should be called books, as they leave the reader with such a strange feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction... to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society" (Woolf, 2020). She advocates for literary innovation, encouraging writers to explore the inner lives of their characters rather than following the traditional realist style of character portrayal.

The novels 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Great Gatsby' exemplify the narrative style that Woolf advocates in her essays. Both explore the inner lives and psychological depth of their characters, emphasizing emotion and subjective experience over external action.

In her novel 'Mrs. Dalloway', Woolf exemplifies the modernist writing style by portraying a single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares for a party scheduled for that evening.

The narrative shifts fluidly between past and present through Clarissa's thoughts and memories, employing a stream-of-consciousness technique. A parallel storyline follows Septimus, a war veteran who, like Clarissa, struggles to communicate with others while maintaining the privacy of his mental suffering. His trauma underlines Woolf's critique of societal indifference to psychological complexity.

Similarly, Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, recounts the story of Gatsby through his observations and conversations, revealing Gatsby's complex inner feelings towards his beloved Daisy. Through Carraway's subjective perspective, the novel explores themes of desire, identity and disillusionment emphasizing psychological depth of the characters. Though Fitzgerald employs a more structured narrative techniques comparing to Woolf both of them prioritize the internal landscape of their characters. Chehrit and Hamdada (2016) argue that in both novels, the characters attempt to cope with feelings of loss, disillusionment, and oppression by concealing their authentic selves and adapting their behavior to conform to the expectations of modern society.

2. Literary Analysis: Virginia Woolf's Essays

As noted above, Woolf's essays 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' and 'Modern Fiction' provide a significant critique of the literary works produced by the late Victorian generation. In her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Woolf categorizes the novelists of that era into two distinct groups: "Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy I will call the Edwardians; Mr. Forster, Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot I will call the Georgians" (Woolf, 2020), highlighting the contrast in their literary approaches. In both essays, she advocates for the literary changes that emerged around 1910, a period she identifies as the turning point when narrative style began to shift. Rather than focusing on materialist themes, novelists started to explore more internal aspects, emphasizing the inner perspectives of their characters and offering thorough depiction of human complexity.

In her essay 'Modern Fiction', Woolf critiques the work of writers from the previous generation; specifically, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy; arguing that their narrative styles are conservative and overly focused on external details. This is evident when she writes, "Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! Their masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity" (Woolf, 1925). According to Woolf, their work lacks depth, as it prioritizes external reality over the inner world and psychological complexity of characters; elements she considers central to the modern novel.

Woolf provides a clearer illustration of her critique through the character of Mrs. Brown in her fictive journey from Richmond to Waterloo. She analyzes this character from two opposing narrative perspectives: those of the novelists she critiques (the Edwardians) and those she supports (the Georgians). As Woolf explains, "Mr. Bennett would keep his eyes in the carriage. He, indeed, would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons; how Mrs. Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar" (Woolf, 2020). This suggests that Edwardian writers were primarily concerned with material details, objectivity. In contrast, the Georgians sought to explore the complexity of subjective experience. Furthermore, Mrs. Brown symbolizes the differing perceptions of women's roles: while the Edwardians portrayed women as domestic figures bound by conservative norms, the Georgians acknowledged their individuality, personal thoughts, and inner lives.

Woolf used these two essays as platforms to advocate innovative literary techniques such as stream of conscience and psychological realism. She illustrates this in 'Modern Fiction', writing: "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" (Woolf, 1925). This reflects her emphasis on capturing fragmented nature of human thought. Similarly, in her depiction of the fictive character Hilda, Woolf contrasts the Edwardian and Georgian perspectives: while the Edwardians merely observed the external ("she not only looked at houses"), the Georgians explored interiority ("but she lived in a house"), focusing on emotions, thoughts, and perceptions.

3. Application To "Mrs. Dalloway"

Mrs. Dalloway is considered one of Woolf's most accomplished novels. It represents modernist literary style. It exemplifies the narrative innovations introduced by Woolf and her contemporaries, marking a clear shift from the conventions of earlier fiction. When analyzed in light of the arguments presented in her essays 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', the novel demonstrates Woolf's sophisticated application of stream of consciousness, narrative fragmentation, and psychological subjectivity to convey the inner lives of her characters.

The narrative style of 'Mrs. Dalloway' closely reflects the arguments Woolf puts forward in her essays 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' and 'Modern Fiction'. Unlike the Edwardian novelists, who emphasized realism and detailed descriptions of the external world, Woolf's narrative focuses on the internal states of her characters. The novel explores the thoughts, emotions, and inner monologues of Clarissa Dalloway, as well as other characters such as Septimus Smith, Peter Walsh, and Richard Dalloway, representing Woolf's theories of subjectivity and individual perception in modern fiction. This is illustrated when Clarissa reflects on her identity: "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown" (Woolf, 1922, p. 14), revealing her psychological detachment and inward focus; characteristics typical of the modernist figures that Woolf advocates for.

The novel describes a single day in Clarissa Dalloway's life, during which her spontaneous memories and flashbacks reveal much of her past. The narrative begins with her preparing for the party she will host that evening. As she steps outside, her thoughts immediately shift back in time, as reflected in her exclamations: "What a lark! What a plunge!" (Woolf, 1922, p. 3). These lines introduce the reader to Clarissa as an eighteen-year-old living in Bourton, establishing the novel's focus on memory and inner thought as tools for character exploration. Fragmentation is another technique that she uses in Mrs. Dalloway to construct her mentally deviant

Fragmentation is another technique Woolf employs in Mrs. Dalloway, particularly in the construction of the mentally disturbed character Septimus. His fragmented monologue in the park: "Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known" (Woolf, 1922, p. 35)—is deliberately vague and fragmented. Each fragment conveys aspects of Septimus's troubled perception of life and reflects his traumatic experiences during the war.

The complex relationship between Clarissa and Sally, which remains unclear regarding its romantic nature, is illustrated in an intimate moment when "Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips... the others disappeared; there was she alone with Sally" (Woolf, 1922, p. 52). This ambiguity reflects the psychological complexity Woolf attributes to her characters, contrasting with the simpler characterizations typical of the Edwardian novelists, as critiqued in her essays.

Mrs. Dalloway is a complex novel due to Woolf's use of techniques such as stream of consciousness, temporal fluidity, and fragmentation. These techniques are deliberately employed to immerse the reader in the inner lives of the characters, enabling an exploration of the complexity of human experience in relation to life.

4. Comparison with "The Great Gatsby"

'The Great Gatsby' and 'Mrs. Dalloway' are two distinct novels, as Fitzgerald employs a slightly different narrative style. However, both works embody the same principles of modernist writing articulated by Woolf in her essays. In 'Mrs. Dalloway', stream of conscience serves as the primary technique, whereas in 'The Great Gatsby', Fitzgerald uses his character Nick Carraway to narrate the main character's life experiences based on his perceptions and observations. This narrative technique intrigues the reader about the reliability of the story.

However, certain Woolf techniques can be identified in 'The Great Gatsby', making the two novels compatible in some aspects of modernist writing. The narrator, Nick Carraway, emphasizes his subjectivity; a characteristic of modernist narrative—and narrates the story through his personal perceptions, often withholding objective judgment. This is evident at the beginning of the novel when he states, "I am inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened many curious natures to me..." (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 1).

Fitzgerald, like Woolf, explores the complexity of human nature and modernity through the character of Gatsby, as seen from Nick's perspective. Gatsby's mysterious and ambiguous background; who acquired his fortune from nowhere in an effort to elevate himself to the social status of his beloved Daisy; is exemplified in a conversation between some women in the novel: "He's a bootlegger... one time he killed a man who had found out that he was a nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 43). This portrayal aligns with Woolf's call for more enigmatic and psychologically complex characters, moving away from superficial and rigid depictions.

In summary, this novel exemplifies the modernist principles advocated by Woolf in both of her essays through its thorough exploration of characters' emotional states, the fragmentation of societal values, and the contrast between reality and appearance.

5. Themes and Motifs

In her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Woolf emphasizes the need for a refined understanding of character psychology. As she states, "I have said that people have to acquire a good deal of skill in character-reading" (Woolf, 2020), highlighting the importance of deep psychological analysis in modern fiction. This argument relates directly to the themes and motifs that contemporary writers should explore to reflect the complexities of human experience.

Both novels "Mrs. Dalloway" and "The Great Gatsby" explore the theme of the psychologically complex characters, reflecting complicated nature of humans and their complex relation to life and identity; a common theme of both novels. Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus and Gatsby, Daisy all fit here with their complexity and their perception towards life and society, always seeking to explore and represent their identity.

Time is another central theme shared by 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Great Gatsby', although represented differently in each novel. Woolf remarks, "As time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion", (Woolf, 1925), capturing the passage of time and human resistance to its effects. In "Mrs. Dalloway", time is nonlinear and fragmented in the thoughts of Clarissa and Septimus as they go back and forth in time through memories. In contrast, 'The Great Gatsby' approaches time through Gatsby's obsessive longing to recreate the past with Daisy, making time a symbol of desire, illusion, and loss. As Caramagno (2018) observes, "they attempted to depict duration by constructing narratives in which there was a felt continuity between the past and the present", a technique seen in how both novels explore memory and personal experience rather than following time in a chronological order.

The nature of reality is a common theme of both novels, as Characters in each novel are more focused on representing their internal persona. Clarissa's external appearance shows her to be a well composed lady, happily married and well-established social status, however, through her internal reflections, the reader becomes aware of her underlying fears, regrets, and insecurities about her past decisions. Similarly, Gatsby has constructed his life and his character based on illusion of a life he always wanted to have with Daisy, representing the fakeness of the American Dream.

A common motif shared by 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Great Gatsby' is the use of parties, which serve as social performances through which Clarissa and Gatsby attempt to align themselves with the societal roles they aspire. Clarissa hosts her party to affirm her place within upper-class of English society, while Gatsby's gatherings intend to attract Daisy and secure his status within the American elite. Another significant motif is death. Septimus ends his life to terminate the suffering that life caused him, whereas Gatsby is murdered as a consequence of his vain dream. Both deaths symbolize the collapse of the ideals these characters represent and reflect failures of the societies in which they live.

6. Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's essays 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' and 'Modern Fiction' provide a useful lens for understanding the stream of consciousness in Mrs. Dalloway, Gatsby's idealization of love, and the complex portrayals of memory, identity, and emotion in both novels. In these essays, Woolf advocates for a transition from conventional materialist and realist narratives to a more spiritual and abstract portrayal of characters and the complexity of the world around them. This literary shift is reflected in both novels, although in different ways. In 'Mrs. Dalloway', Woolf experiments with narrative fragmentation, moving back and forth in time through stream of consciousness, which engages the reader by revealing the innermost thoughts of the characters; precisely the narrative method she calls for in both essays. Similarly, Fitzgerald in 'The Great Gatsby', although using a more conventional structure, moves away from traditional narrative techniques by exploring the psychological depth of his characters and focusing on their inner lives.

Ultimately, these two essays not only critique traditional narrative styles but also present how modern fiction redefines character and narrative by prioritizing psychological depth and subjective experience; an evolution clearly represented in 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Great Gatsby'.

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