



Virginia Woolf

Author(s): Joseph Warren Beach

Source: *The English Journal*, Oct., 1937, Vol. 26, No. 8 (Oct., 1937), pp. 603-612

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/805150>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The English Journal*

JSTOR

The ENGLISH JOURNAL

Vol. XXVI

OCTOBER 1937

No. 8

VIRGINIA WOOLF

JOSEPH WARREN BEACH¹

It was her technical virtuosity that first aroused my interest in Virginia Woolf, and I have never failed to greet each new invention in form and manner. It is this, indeed, more than anything else, that has kept my interest alive since first my attention was drawn to the airy impressionism of *Jacob's Room*. It carried me with eager curiosity through the retrospective musings of *Mrs. Dalloway*—the rhythmical interweaving of subjective and objective, the dialogue of souls, interpenetration of souls, the assimilation of all expository matter into the tissue of immediate experience—the circular progression of narrative in which an entire life is presented in the moods and reveries of a single day. This same fascination with method made half the enchantment of *To the Lighthouse*, with its obstinate pursuit—in and out of so many minds—of the stream of consciousness; with its ingenious development of a group of personalities round the project of a trip to the lighthouse carried out ten years after the death of the person most concerned; with its intriguing parallel between the author's problem and the problem of Lily Briscoe, the painter.

It was not, of course, mere interest in technique but an interest in technical devices as means for realizing certain intentions. It was obvious that here was an author with very special intentions, who had set herself to the rendering of certain phases of experience that

¹ Professor Beach, who has taught at the University of Minnesota since 1924, is author of such critical works as *Meek Americans*, *The Outlook for American Prose*, *The Twentieth Century Novel*, and *Glass Mountain*, a novel.

could not be caught in the web of ordinary narrative. In her first two novels (*The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*) she had tried out the traditional methods of story-telling, and the results were disappointing: the outlines were too sharp, a certain stiffness and formality clung to her statement of facts. One felt that she was right in the deliberation with which she chose her less formal methods, beginning with *Jacob's Room*. Deliberation was evident in her very informality, in her very surrender to the seemingly freakish association of ideas. We felt that her intentions were special. Where we could not altogether follow, we took them for granted; and it was part of the game to test our own agility, catching at the tail of some precious and elusive apprehension. Often enough we were successful; we saw the pertinence of her technical devices. We were ready to start again with some new invention.

In *Orlando* and *The Waves* the deliberation was even more obvious, and there was a return to simpler forms. Only, the conventional forms to which she adhered were of her own invention and departed farther from the customary methods of "imitating nature." *Orlando* was the story of a single person—a vast composite—whose life went on continuously through many successive generations and who was man and woman by turns. We realized the intentions, or some of them. We said: "This is not so lifelike as *Mrs. Dalloway*, but we must allow the author the philosophic statement of maturity." In *The Waves* we found another convention that departed in its own way from the customary manner. This book is made up altogether of speeches of the six characters—six childhood friends who are carried forward through the drift of their lives. But these are not real speeches; they are rather poetic monologues, with more of what was thought than what was said, and more of what was felt than thought. If it is dialogue, it is the dialogue of souls—an interpretation in terms of speech of the way in which the souls felt about themselves. The manner was fluid and imaged and tintured with a faint nostalgic charm. And we said: "This is not so natural as *To the Lighthouse*, but it has its own beauty, and it is a valuable commentary on the whole body of her writing."

And now, with *The Years*, we have a return to the more natural and impressionistic method of her second period, but more regular

in sequence and progression. Fragments and impressions of many interrelated lives through several generations, making up together the sense of a social milieu, a manner of life and feeling, delicately colored, wistful, inconclusive. . . . "And yes," we say, "we recognize the hand, and it has not lost its cunning. But why do we have the sense of being let down? Why do we turn back to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*?" What questions, earlier put, have failed of an answer, save an echoing repetition of Clarissa and Lily Briscoe: "What did it mean to her, this thing called life?"

Not that I would, for a moment, suggest that it is the business of a novelist to give us an answer to this question of the meaning of life, whether it be, as in Hardy, that "universal harshness" out of which grow men's harshnesses toward one another or whether it be, as in *Anna Karenina*, simply and mystically "God." It is not, in any case, these particular formulations that make the greatness of Tolstoy and Hardy but the characters and situations in which the author's feeling about life is given embodiment. It is the life itself which the author conjures up, the people and their living in which we are concerned as if it were our own. And first of all, in order to be concerned about these people, we must believe in them. This is a point frequently made by Mrs. Woolf herself in her critical essays.² Tolstoy, she says, has the art of making us believe in ways of living we had never imagined, so great an impression he makes of integrity, of truthfulness.

Bennett and Galsworthy and Wells, she says, have not this art. And the reason is that they are "materialists." They are too much taken up with the houses in which people live, their servants, fathers, incomes—thinking by means of these material circumstances to define the character for us and make it live. But the life escapes them; for the life of men is in the spirit. What leads one to write fiction, she says, is the desire to create some character that has imposed itself on one's imagination. But the Edwardians were so cramped by realistic conventions as to the means of creating character that they let it slip through their fingers. The problem of her time—the problem of the Georgians—was to free the novel from these "material-

² *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924); *The Common Reader* (1925) (see especially "Modern Fiction"); *A Room of One's Own* (1929); *The Second Common Reader* (1932).

istic" conventions. It was to this end that she welcomed the new techniques, and she went in for the stream-of-consciousness. Thus she writes, referring to Joyce, the most notable then of the young writers: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."

Too much cannot be made of the importance of Virginia Woolf in the movement for limbering up the novel. But when it comes to the creation of characters, one reader is constrained to record that for him she has not, with all her freedom and subtlety of method, done better than Galsworthy and that she has not approached the achievement of Arnold Bennett. She has created no character in whom I believe more than I believe in Sophia Baines or Samuel Povey or Soames Forsyte. In the course of time her characters have a strong tendency to fade out of the mind as individuals, to get confused with one another. I do not always recognize a character when he reappears at a later stage in the story. This is notably true in *The Years*. Here it is partly attributable to the method, which requires that the characters should frequently give place to one another; so little space is devoted to any one of them at first that the reader fails to get deeply interested in him and to receive a sharp impression of his personality. But a somewhat similar method is followed in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, which has so much larger a cast of characters and is so much more "materialistic"; and yet I do not have the same difficulty there in fixing the personal identity of the characters. And I begin to wonder whether there is not something mistaken in the philosophy—or is it the psychology?—implied in Mrs. Woolf's use of the term "materialistic." And I begin to look in the novels themselves for clues to the author's intention—her notion of what makes character and what makes "life."

Such clues are innumerable. In all the novels there are suggestions that reality is something elusive and esoteric. There are repeated declarations that it is impossible really to know any human being. "How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twenty-six a stupid fellow? It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. . . ." The dark waters are wider than the momentary spots of light.

Yet those roaring waters, said Neville, upon which we build our crazy platforms are more stable than the wild, the weak and inconsequent cries that we utter when, trying to speak, we rise; when we reason and jerk out these false sayings, "I am this; I am that." Speech is false. . . . I have tried to break off this bunch and hand it to you; but whether there is substance or truth in it I do not know. Nor do I know exactly where we are. . . . I begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now.

My life, Eleanor said to herself. That was odd, it was the second time that evening that somebody had talked about her life. And I haven't got one, she thought. Oughtn't a life to be something you could handle and produce?—a life of seventy odd years. . . . Millions of things came back to her. Atoms danced apart and massed themselves. But how did they compose what people called a life?

Being thus vague, inconsecutive, and without distinct outline, life and character are apprehended and rendered in the spotty and allusive way of certain impressionistic painters. "Look at the lights down there, scattered about anyhow. Things I feel come to me like lights. . . . I want to combine them." Thus speaks the young novelist in *The Voyage Out*.

But it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convention, a lie. There is always deep below it, even when we arrive punctually at the appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights—elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing—that rise and sink, even as we hand a lady down to dinner. . . . There is nothing we can fish up in a spoon; nothing one can call an event. Yet it is alive too and deep, this stream.

Thus speaks Bernard, the poet, the phrase-maker, one of the many representatives in her novels of Virginia Woolf, giving his account of the stream of consciousness in which our life floats like a candlewick in a bowl of tallow. And the life of the individual floats, according to Bernard, according to Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay and Eleanor Pargiter—the individual life floats in a stream of other lives, actual and potential, known and unknown—lives of persons and of trees and of houses and of all that makes up what Walter Pater calls our "soul-stuff."

And now I ask, "Who am I?" I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. . . . Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan's tears. . . . Thus when I come to shape here at this table between my hands the

story of my life and set it before you as a complete thing, I have to recall things gone far, gone deep, sunk into this life or that and become part of it; dreams, too, things surrounding me, and the inmates, those old half-articulate ghosts . . . shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves.

But, she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out all the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind the counter—even trees, or barns.

With such a view of the human personality, so fluid and comprehensive, we understand the dispersed and glancing character of the narrative technique. We understand, too, why, among the fleeting glimpses of Jacob Flanders, we have so many views of other persons, dozens of them, who took note of him or had an effect upon him, or who in some way "completed" him. We understand why the tragedy of Septimus Smith is woven into the musical pattern of Clarissa's life, and why, in the midst of her party, when she learned of his death, she at once realized the relevance of his case to her own. We understand why, after the death of Mrs. Ramsay, during the years of its inoccupation, so much is made of the country home in which she had served dinner to her guests and sat knitting at the window and reading to her son. And we understand the whole intricate pattern of *The Years*.

And here we have a clue, perhaps, to the relative want of definiteness and vividness of her characters. She has given full scope to what she calls the spiritual side of her people, meaning the psychical or imaginative. She has reduced to a minimum the importance of *things*. And yet she has set on its feet no character that will compare with Becky Sharp or Jane Eyre or Charles Bovary or with any of the Buddenbrooks or Karamazovs. And the reason lies, I venture to guess, in a fundamental point of psychology. The Edwardians she found at fault in supposing that the ego is constituted by material things—houses, servants, fathers, incomes. She makes the mistake herself of supposing that the ego is constituted by the imaginative impressions that snow down upon it like cosmic rays. "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind."

Now, I do not question the importance in shaping the personalities of the atoms that fall upon the mind. But we cannot stop there. We cannot suppose that every one of the myriad atoms so falling on the mind makes a distinct impression on the personality, or that the mind on which they fall is utterly passive to them. An utterly passive mind would receive no impression at all from the falling atoms. There is in every mind some principle of selection, some agency of choice. And this agency of choice is in the character—that is, in the attitudes and emotions of the person concerned. And what defines the attitudes and emotions? Why, the objectives, the ends sought, and the line of action that promises to realize these ends. The psychologist, I think, would tell us that character is determined by the organization of energies for action. The senses and the mind are instruments of behavior. It is not, then, things in themselves that constitute character, nor is it the passive reception of impressions. It is the manner of organization of human energy for behavior. The stream of consciousness is indeed an important factor in human experience, but subjection to the stream of consciousness is the sign of a weak and ill-defined character. A notable subjection to it is an indication of some dissolution of the psyche, some morbid want of continuity between conception and execution. The strong character is one that, among the multifarious “atoms” of the stream of consciousness, centers its attention on those that are most relevant to its objectives.

In fiction there is nothing that makes more for vividness of character than strong desire met by strong resistance in the person himself or in the circumstances encountered. This is the principle of tragic drama, in which the tension is created by the strength of a will pitted against the strength of circumstance. There is a similar tension in all stories where the moral sense is shown offering its resistance to the character’s desire. In comedy, the interest lies in a sharp contrast between the character’s pretensions and his real motives, or between the triviality of his performance and the lofty standard against which it is measured. In Mrs. Woolf there is no tincture of tragedy and only the faintest hint of comedy. She is too “modern” for melodrama or morality. Everything is bathed in a solution of sympathy and understanding. This may be a fine thing

in its own way, as is the mystical dream of life in its flow. But it does not make for differentiation of character, nor for either the gusty sense of life in action or the sense of coming to grips with life.

Mrs. Woolf's characters seldom seem to know what they want with any definiteness, nor want it with passion.³ Some are supposed to be earning their livings or pursuing careers. But we are never shown what it means to earn a living, never made to feel the pinch of need, the lure of the game, still less the "rigor of the game." They are said to fall in love, but it is like people in a dream; there is no hint of a biological urge or even of the passion of the ego. They marry people of their own class rather than those they love, but there is little suggestion of the agony of unsatisfied love or the frightful ennui of a life of convenience. We are told that Clarissa took hard her break with Peter, that she "had borne about with her for years like an arrow sticking in her heart the grief, the anguish." But this is shockingly out of key with the rest of the picture; we don't know whether to take it as the author's sober view of the case or the effusive tone of a sentimental society woman. In general, Mrs. Woolf does not seem to realize the tragic intensity with which human beings take their ambitions, their disappointments, their very boredom.

It is true that most people manage to break the force of their sufferings by some process of rationalization. It is a natural instinct for dealing with what would be unbearable if faced directly. The extrovert plunges into trivial activities that distract the mind. The introvert develops mystical illusions and evasions. The characters of Virginia Woolf are generally a combination of the two, but it is the mystical evasions of the introvert that she mainly features. Since they cannot live, her characters are forever striving to "lose themselves in the process of living." Bernard loves to think that life is a dream. The creative artist finds in her creative activity a way of escape from "reality." Like all her important characters, Lily Bris-

³ For me the most convincing of her character-creations is Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, and the most interesting situation is that involving him and his son and daughter while on their sailing trip. I wish there were space to analyze the character of Mr. Ramsay and show how its vividness derives from the force of this man's need for a woman's sympathy, and how the intensity of the relation between him and his son grows out of their sharply defined rivalry for a woman's affection.

coe is particularly fond of moods where everything seems illusory. "So coming back from a journey, or after an illness . . . one felt the same unreality, which was so startling, felt something emerge. Life was most vivid then. One glided, one shook one's sails . . . between things, beyond things." Men and women alike, her people are forever seeking, above everything, the sense of peace, of withdrawal from all effort and all thought save some vague thought of the ineffable meaning of life.

This is, we know, the symptom and the sedative of pain, frustration, and nervous exhaustion. This "meaning of life" is indeed ineffable, something mystically apprehended, never an intellectual construction, still less a construction of the will. It is not an ideal to be realized, for that would imply effort and action. It partakes of the vagueness in which the characters habitually move, their airy sketchiness and inconclusiveness. If there is one thing that Mrs. Woolf loves more than another, it is unfinished sentences, fragmentary conversations, questions unanswered and unformulated. These correspond to lines of conduct vaguely projected and early broken off. It is such things that give their special character of futility to the lives of the Pargiters and their friends in *The Years*. They are eminently "nice" people; but they need nothing, want nothing, and get nowhere either in their lives or in their thinking. There seems to be some realization on the author's part that this is so, and she has introduced certain characters for the express purpose of passing judgment on these people. They dream of a way of acting "differently" from those who came before them; but the difference they envisage is so vague, so "spiritual"—in short, so sentimental—that it gives away the game. Neither North nor Peggy nor, seemingly, the author has any notion that it is the decadence of a social order which they are witnessing, and that a willingness to act in a material world is the necessary preliminary to any real spiritual regeneration.

There is no evidence through all her work that Mrs. Woolf has a comprehension of the social forces underlying the world she describes. And I cannot but feel that there is an element of sentimental evasion in her inveterate preference—at least in fiction—for vagueness of feeling and thought. She has given an excellent representation of the surface psychology of well-meaning and sensitive

people floating without effort on the surface of a social order designed to give them ease and security. These people are legion; and large numbers of them, no doubt, are mainly characterized by the sort of daydreaming which we have in *Clarissa* and *Mrs. Ramsay* and *Lily Briscoe* and *Bernard*; so we must acknowledge that she has added something considerable to our aesthetic satisfaction in thus delineating a significant type of human nature. But it is not the most interesting type for fiction, not being strong enough to move us deeply. And her characters of this type are not sufficiently individualized—as to sex, for example, and special predicament—to make a truly “dramatic” offering. Her leading characters are so like in idiom and tone of mind that one is tempted to regard them as little more than variations on a single theme, and this theme drawn from something in the author’s own temperament. If that is right, what we have is, properly speaking, a series of lyrical utterances in story form. They are an authentic document in psychology. They are highly interesting in method and manner. And they make up altogether a distinctive and original contribution to the store of English fiction.

USING COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

HELEN J. HANLON¹

My part in this general program of American youth and his English is to present procedure which makes use of the resources of the community in the teaching of English in Detroit.

Alert teachers of English have ever been awake to the social aspect of their subject matter. They have supplied help for actual need—to a boy writing his first application for a job; to the foreign girl who wishes her wedding invitations to be “real American”; to the negro youth who writes an oration to be delivered at a relative’s funeral; to the Jewish lad who prepares a speech for the time of his formal entrance into the fold of his faith.

¹ This paper was delivered at the general session of the National Council of Teachers of English at Boston, November 27, 1936. Miss Hanlon, who is head of the department of English, Miller High School, Detroit, Mich., received her Master’s degree from the University of Michigan.