

Hello and welcome, learners.

Today we shall look at Unit 2: Literary Criticism for the final year students of the Bachelor of Arts program. Under this, we shall look at Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction". I am Deepa Prajith, Associate Professor from Government College, Quepem..

Here is a brief course outline. We will first get to know Virginia Woolf: the person from her biography, her writings and her role as a critic. Then we look at her essay, in particular, "Modern Fiction". We will have an introduction. We look at her categorisation of writers as materialists and spiritualists. We will look at her technique and then we shall conclude.

Module outcomes include: An understanding of Virginia Woolf's essay. Hopefully, the learner will be able to situate Woolf's ideas in the historical context of literary criticism and analyze Woolf's contribution to fiction and its criticism.

Adeline Virginia Woolf was born on 25th January 1882. Her parents are Leslie Stevens and Julia Jackson, who married in 1878. Both of them were married previously and had four children from their previous marriages. Then they had four more children Vanessa, Toby, Virginia and Adrian

Virginia Stevens met and married Leonard Woolf in 1912. She had a very excitable personality. She could reach ecstatic heights and then plunge into the darkest of abyss.

Her emotional anchor was her sister Vanessa, and then of course, her husband Leonard Woolf. She battled depression for a long time and then finally drowned herself on 28 March 1941.

Let's take a look at some of her major writings. She has done both short fiction as well as long fiction. She has written reviews as well as criticism. She has also written an immense amount of epistles as well as maintained a diary very consistently. Some of her major works include Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, A Room of One's Own, and all the reviews and criticism have been collected and released as a Common Reader: Series I and II.

Now let us look at Virginia Woolf, the critic, as a critic.

She does two roles. She has been a reviewer who worked under time pressure—deadlines to meet review essays as well as for monetary gain. She has always maintained anonymity while doing reviews. In her reviews as well as in her criticism, she has scrutinized the process of reading and writing. In particular, this narrative structure, subject and style. Her reviews as well as her criticism reflect her thoughts and opinions and the theorized ideas were later experimented with in her own writing.

Virginia Woolf's Modern Fiction is an essay that straddles two literary ages, the

Victorian and the Modern . It represents three transitions, in particular, the historical, literary, and personal. It was first written in 1919 under the title "Modern Novels". It was revised in 1925 as "Modern Fiction".

"Modern Fiction" is an analysis of the progress in fiction writing. At the outset, Virginia Woolf uses the analogy of comparison between fiction and that of machine making, in particular cars. She finds that there has been tremendous progress in the making of cars, yet fiction seems to be very, very slow in changing and creating new methods of writing; so she finds fiction wanting.

Fiction had tread a linear path with very few digressions, and so it followed a closed circuit. It was static and largely remained static to follow permutations and combinations that were both trite as well as simple. The key points include, like I said earlier, her two categories of materialists and spiritualists, which she then compares and contrasts. She wishes to move away from the materialist objective point of view to the subjective point of view, in search of a deeper connection between the reader and writer, and her challenge throughout her own writing as well as in criticism, was how to represent the inner world of thoughts and feelings.

Materialist writers preferred the realistic function of literature. They used realism to a large extent to depict the external world that of the Victorian age. Materialists were slaves to a formula, so much so that she even wonders whether they were subject to the threats of a publishing house who had found a winning formula and wanted the writers to follow that formula for repeated success. Their focus was on the external world in minute detail and the banalities of everyday life was the stuff of their fiction.

On the other hand, you have the spiritualist writers who used the technique of interior monologues and stream of consciousness with which they presented the working of the inner mind. The authors restricted themselves in fact to their depiction of the inner workings of the mind and that freedom of choice is reflected in certain writers.

In what way are the materialistic writers formulaic? They used the stock plot, scenes, incident and the elements of comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy and romance to create novels that went on echoing each other and were very similar to each other. They were based on probability, included huge amounts of melodrama, and the template was the same irrespective of who the writer was. Materialist writers like H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy come under scrutiny. Woolf praises their gifts immensely, yet she castigates them for raising reader expectations and then the delivery being very very underwhelming.

Spiritualist writers are also realistic, but rather than focusing on the external world, they focus on the inner perception of the mind. A symmetrical arrangement included a disjointed form of writing because the thoughts, the way they hit the mind was to be recorded in their disjointed manner, hence the asymmetrical arrangement. In this, we have to remember that awareness is partly ungrammatical, partly nonverbal and partly pre-logical, and this affects the way the novel is written because it represents the inner workings of

the mind. It is also seen as a psychological novel that represents consciousness for it explores the dark habitations of the innermost mind. Examples of spiritualist writers include James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Anton Chekhov.

They contain impressions received by the mind in Virginia Woolf's words trivial, fantastic or evanescent, and capture the inner world of the flickering half shadows. She uses Anton Chekhov's short story "Gusev" to exemplify what she means by spiritualist writers. The narrative technique that she emphasizes is impressionistic and disjointed. The continued and the linear fluidity of materialist writers are overtaken by a very different kind of writing. Because this kind of writing seeks to capture the subtleties of the working of the mind. Stream of consciousness is the main technique and an interior monologue is used when thoughts of a particular character in a particular event is sequenced as it is received.

What is the role of the reader? What does the reader expect?

The reader expects a presentation of character because they would like to be intimate with the character. They need a certain amount of objective reality, the external world, but they're more interested in subjective reality. What do the characters experience? They are bored of predictability because they can bet on the outcome with a fair chance of being proved right. Fidelity to life is what Virginia Woolf expects in Novels because if they manage to capture the anxieties, the doubts and the uncertainties of life and living, then that particular fiction is what can be termed as original fiction.

In conclusion, we must understand that the technique to capture the inner workings of the mind had to be unconventional, hence they use Stream of consciousness and Interior monologue. There is undue emphasis on being honest to what life in living means, and therefore falsity and pretence are forbidden. Fiction for Virginia Woolf is the art of possibilities, whose purpose is to fill fiction with life. And that is what "Modern Fiction" is all about.

Here are a few references.

Thank you.