

Analysis of Virginia Woolf's Essay "Modern Fiction"

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Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) an English novelist and critic who made an original contribution to English Novel. Modern fiction is an essay by Virginia Woolf. This essay was written in 1919 but published in 1921 with a series of short stories called Monday or Tuesday. The essay is the 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.

Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction" details how modern fictional writers and authors should write what inspires them and not to follow any special method. She believed that Writers are constrained by the publishing business, by what society believes literature should look like and what society has dictated how literature should be written. Woolf believed it is a writer's Job to write the complexities in life, the unknown, not the important things.

Modern fiction is one of the most effective seminar essays in criticism which makes a clear break of modern fiction from the Victorian novel. Mrs. Woolf first traces the progress of the novel from its beginning in the 18th Century. But she traces it on basis of the philosophy of evaluation in general. According to her, the earlier novelists really did what they actually could within their limited means. With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said "Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better."

Literature, according to T.S. Eliot, is like everything else, a process which makes the present. This is why, it does not just improve, it always keep changing. Its material is not same. Mrs. Woolf agrees with Eliot on this point and says:

"We do not come to write better, we only keep on moving now a little in this direction, now in that but with a circular motion."

Says Virginia Woolf, "It is for the historian of literature to judge whether the modern novel has really progressed from its early babblings." As a critic, she naturally upholds her "right to judge the past with debt as well as doubt."

She Criticises M.G. Wells, Arnold Benett, John Galsworthy of writing about unimportant things and called them materialists. According to her, they put life into their novels. They are mainly concerned with the body, not the soul of the novel. This is particularly because they are all materialists and are concerned with fixities not with movements. But Mr. Benett is perhaps the worst culprit of the three, in as much as he is by far the best workman. He can make a book so well constructed in its craftsmanship that is difficult even for the expecting critics to see through which chink or crevice decay can creep in. Being a kind of post modernist, Mrs. Woolf would like the writer to leave the room in his room. According to her, there is nothing in a well constructed novel worth preserving for the prosperity. She suggests that it would be better for literature to turn their backs on them, so it can move forward, for better or worse. While Woolf criticizes these three authors, she praises several other authors for their innovation. This group of writers she name spiritualists, and include James Joyce who Woolf says writes what interests and move him.

Woolf wanted writers to focus on the awkwardness of life and craved originality in their work. Her overall hope was to inspire modern fiction writers to write what interested them, wherever it may lead. As a typical modern novelists and critic Mrs. Woolf advises the modern novelists to look within and see what life is like, "Mind receives a crowd of impressions- trivial, fantastic or engraved with the sharpness of steer." So she does not like "life-like novels, nor in the tyrant plot, nor in the conventional comedy or love-interest". "If Life like this?" "Must Novel be like this?" She asks & then adds:

"Look within and life, it seems, is very far being 'like this'. 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 the consciousness to the end."

Mrs. Woolf make it clear that the objective of the writer in his or her creation is to look within and life as a whole. The traditionalism or materialism do not capture at that moment. Thus to trust upon life, a writer is free and he could write what he chose.

Mr. James Joyce is most notable from that of their predecessors. Young writers within he attempt to come closer to life and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them. And in doing so they must discard most of conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. She praises Thomas Hardy,

Joseph Conrad, William Henry Hudson, James Joyce and Anton Chekhov.

As a critic her writing and criticism was often done by intuition and feeling rather than by a scientific, analytical and systematic method, Virginia Woolf Says:

“Life escapes and perhaps Life nothing else is worth while. It is a confession of vagueness it have to make use of such a figure.” Life for Virginia Woolf is not fixed, but a changing process. It is a flux, shower of atoms of ‘luminous halo’. The human consciousness is a shelter of sensation and impression. It is the duty of novelist to convey these sensation and impressions. There should be no limitations or conventions. Thus, Virginia Woolf is the fist theorist of the “Stream of Consciousness.” So, she says: “It is a task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit of life.”

To sum up, Virginia Woolf observes that “Nothing—no method, un experiment, even of the wildest—is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence.” “the proper stuff of fiction does not exist, everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain & spirit is drawn upon.”

Though the novels of Virginia Woolf have well knit plot, perfect structure and coherence unlike most of modern psychological novelists belonging to ‘the stream of consciousness’. She strongly and significantly points out that the modern novel can grow only if a novelist is free from conventions to write from his or her own vision of life and keeps in the view the changing concept of life as revealed by modern psychology and such other scientific discoveries about the working of human mind or consciousness.

Thus Woolf’s “Modern Fiction” essay focuses on how writers should write or what she hopes for them to write. She does not suggest a specific way to write. instead a she wants writers to simple write what interests them in any way that they choose to write. She suggests “Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers, that brings us closer to the novelists’ intension if we are readers.”

She wanted writers to express themselves in such a way that it showed life. She set out to inspire writers of modern fiction by calling for originality, criticizing those who focused on the unimportant things and comparing the differences of cultural authors, all for the sake of fiction and literature.

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