

## EXPERIMENTAL NOVELS, WRITTEN BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

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### ABSTRACT

Following work is dedicated to Virginia Woolf, the English writer whose novels are still very valuable not only in English modern literature but in world modern literature too. The article is full of details concerning the views of several scientists and authors of many famous literary books towards the writer.

**Keywords:** Modern literature, female writer, innovations in the genre of novel, criticism towards the novels, absence of plot, feministic interpretation of the books, literary analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf has already made her enormous fame as a representative and theoretic of modernism. The interest of critics and ordinary readers in her works had hugely increased for the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century. Woolf's works, which were regarded by her contemporaries as "too fine" for the audience, have gradually been appreciated by the publicity including the one in Russia. However, the writer's books have not been recognized enough in our country so that it could be scientifically and critically assessed in a worthy way as her books started to be published only a few years ago. The novels she wrote are pretty attractive with the form which is connected to her interpretation of the modern reality.

"I came to the conclusion that I can call it philosophy, in any case, it is the idea permanently living inside of me; that there is a certain order in a matter having no shape yet; that we, I mean human creatures are connected to it; that the world is a piece of art; and that we are just parts of that piece of art. Be it Hamlet or Beethoven's Quartet, the truth in the mass that we call the world. There is no Shakespeare and no Beethoven, and there is no god at the same time. We are the music, we are the words, and we are what it contains" (1).

Not only do these lines written by Virginia Woolf depict her general approach to the reality but to the problems of novel writing too. Having made a debut in literature by two quite traditional novels ("Travel", "Day and night"), in the 1920's of current century, Woolf gradually comes to know that the novel, formed according to those times, was not able to enlighten the surrounding reality in a proper way. She tends to think that the novelist's main duty is to describe the moments of existence during which a person experiences the feeling of junction with the surrounding world seeing himself as an integral part in it.

Still this kind of achievement is impossible without innovations in genre of novel. All aspects of the matter must be considered including writing techniques, main principles in organization of the novel and the character's role in the structure of the work. Therefore, it stimulated the next generation and contemporaries' enormous interest in so called "experimental novels" (traditionally considered similar to the works like "Jacob's Room", "Mrs. Dalloway", "To the Lighthouse", "The Waves", "Between the Acts") written by the author where Virginia Woolf gives her theoretical regulations in practice. Being not so radical to her own literary works like

Joyce, she however was able to convey new type of synthesis of writing techniques setting some serious issues of the life in her novels.

It did not take the critics so long time to wait. In the month of March, 1932, Virginia Woolf noted in her diary that two books about her had just appeared in France and Germany. This was a sign of anxiety. "I must not become some kind of figure." (2). However, in the same year, the biography of her life was published by Winfred Holtby in London. (3).

After Virginia Woolf's death, her work were apparently divided into two stages. The first one was begun by E.M. Foster who was her best friend for many years whose name was so valuable for her, as she said, "I always felt that nobody except for Morgan Foster cannot and has not understood what I did." (4). In his article titled as "Virginia Woolf's Early Novels", Foster compared English prose including the works by several authors like, Henry Fielding and Arnold Bennett with the portraits of art gallery. And his remark about Woolf is quite significant in this respect, "She wants to destroy this gallery, but what can be built in place of it? Something more rhythmical. "Jacob's Room" describes a picture of spiral spinning into one point. "Mrs. Dalloway" depicts the one of a cathedral." (5). Being admired by the artistic structure of the works like, "Jacob's Room" and "Mrs. Dalloway", skillfulness presented in those novels may cover the lack of vitality in the characters created by Woolf. Consequently, the epithet, "inspired breathlessness" he used towards her style, has serious reasons. By his speech given in 1941 in Cambridge, E.M. Foster emphasizes her amazing writing style expressing however his doubts on vitality in the characters of her novels. (6) That is why it is not accidental that the main research works written by J. Benet, R.L. Chambers, D. Daiches, B. Blackstone and D. Hefley (7) and also the chapters of the books like, "Tradition and dream" by Walter Allen (Moscow, 1970), "Introduction of the history of an English novel" (Moscow, 1966), translated into Russian language and dedicated to Woolf, and as Rantavaar expresses, involved mainly topographizing the neutral territory between poetry and prose (8) which is based on Virginia Woolf's novels. But here we can see how a pretty paradoxical situation appears. Of course, significance of Woolf's poetry leaves no doubts. But the researchers try to see the originality and formal innovations of her prose in some certain external conditions which are not directly related to the literary practice. In other words, some external factors are attracted in order to explain the internal structural regulations of narration like, significance of her psyche, the group of people she communicated with, her knowledge of different philosophical and esthetical theories, her attitudes towards modern society, woman's issue and etc.

### **Materials and methods**

Thus Josephine O'Brian Shaffer becomes one of the first of the critics who try to give full explanation for the special type of reality which exists in the texts of the works done by Virginia Woolf. The researcher divides it into three main parts: natural phenomenon, social life and the characters' inner world, and tries to interpret the author's novel being based on mutual connection between those elements (9). N. Thakur, another critic, attracts literary scientists' attention to the symbols and motives used in the writer's novels, and he connects them with Indian literature and mythology (10). Other researchers often try to state that the Woolf's novels belong to the group of writers called "Bloomsbury group" (11) (by the way, the invention of the term is connected exactly to Virginia Woolf's name).

In 1972, another two biographical books about the writer's life which were written by her nephew Quentin Bell. Simultaneously, her diary starts to be written which is thought to be her epistolary heritage and contains the collection of essays and narratives, and nowadays, the most popular novels are being republished again and again. Number of the books and the articles

dedicated to Virginia Woolf's works are rising year by year. Therefore, we can only point out some of her mostly valued books.

First of all the monography "The journey into yourself" by Haven Richter where the author sees the basics of Woolf's methods which are relevant to her principals of "mirror" and where it is said, "People, things, views of nature become a range of mirrors reflecting most of the character's aspects. The character however does not realize this process of reflection. Here, the reader must have double vision to observe how the hero gets this reflection process, he catches the sparkles of those reflections."(12). On the other hand, we suppose the main duty of Virginia Woolf's writing is obviously opposite to it as the most important thing is not the reflection but to understand the reality.

Among several studies, Elis van Berren Kelly's research is more particular in which special attention is paid to the form generating the rhythm of narration and the difference between the matter and spirituality. The author's opinion is given as, "World of facts is the world of physical isolation and boundedness, and the world of vision is the world of unity. But none of those worlds cannot exist without each other."(13).

In his research called "World without you", James Neirmor tries to find the way of seeing by which he tells about Virgia Woolf's interpretation of the surrounded environment and he connects the writer's technical innovations with erotic and visionary features of her novels and with her spellboundness by death." (14). However, in spite of several interesting observations, this work appears to be demonstrative for all western world of woolfologists, and analyzing formal novation existing in Virgia Woolf's experimental novels, the researchers ignore the fact that these technical innovations are first of all based not on the external conditions structured as "text – reality" including the reflection of the reality but on understanding it.

Second stage of learning Virginia Woolf's works included late 1970's and early 1980's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is related to American researchers' activities. Literary works of the English writer was being realized. The strategy of interpretation of her novella and her position in the literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are exposed to be revised. As an example, she attracted J. Hillis Miller's attention, who was one of the most influential representatives of Yale school those days. If we see how the researcher acts in a traditional way pointing out that Virginia Woolf's novels were relevant to the ones of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (15), then it will be obvious that in the special chapter about the novel "Between acts" included in his book of 1982 named "Prose and repetition", he tends to view the Woolf's novels as a demonstration of an "undetermined game" between two meanings of the text based on two types repetition interrelations of which neglects basic signs of logics, "either A or not A." (16).

In 1980, a collection of articles was published in the University of California in Berkley, and it was titled as "Virginia Woolf: reassessment and continuing". And in the introduction part, Ralf Friedman, the editor of the collection, notes with a little surprise, "Virginia Woolf's Renaissance is one of those unexpected events which challenge the historians of culture."(17).

Simultaneously, her works may involve consideration based on feministic approach which is still predominant nowadays. The events of her life in literature and her personal life, which were "marginal" from the academic and literary viewpoint, are emphasized. Not only does Virginia Woolf gets the authority in history and literature but she gets new female status in the modern society as well.

She presents the character transforming from a subordinate author into the one with equal rights (typical for English female writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). It was relevantly told by Rachel Bowlby, “Woolf is the only British female writer who is seriously considered by all critics.”(18). Still it must be noted that basing on the M.M. Bahtin’s and French multiculturalistic ideas (J. Derrida, M. Foucault, Lacan’s theory of feministic revision) and by their emphasis on decentration and polyphony to bring equality and destroying all kinds of hierarchy, the critics of this area often tend to make up their concepts that “marginal” obtains not equal but much more priority status. Thus Jane Marcus who has made contribution in new feministic interpretation of Woolf (19), by one of her programmed articles, she lines up the theory of understanding Woolf’s category of “male/female” on the basis of one word which was crossed out in the personal letter sent by the writer to her sister Vanessa Bell (20). Typical are the points presented by Hermione Lee, a professor at Yale University at present. In 1977, on exactly first page of her monography about novels, she made a statement about Woolf’s books, “This book is not Bloomsbury, lesbian love, madness and suicide. There, Virginia Woolf is not seen as a feminist, owner of Hogarth Press, an atheist critic or a biograph. This is a literary research of her nine novels.”(21). However, in 1996, H. Lee released Woolf’s biography in which the English writer’s works are interpreted through her own points of view. In the article published in the Independent newspaper, by the meaningful title “Virginia Woolf, feminine view” Hermione Lee notes that main fault of the previous biography, released in two books, is that the biograph Quentin Bell groundlessly depoliticized the English writer’s lifestyle.(22).

### **Result and discussion**

Main turning points in feministic interpretation of Woolf’s books are shown in the reports which have been held annually since 1992 at the international conferences dedicated to various aspects of the English writer’s life and the materials given on the social network which is named Virginia Woolf Web. Leaving behind the conclusions made by critics, we can point out their interpretations in which reality is depicted depending on their desires. It is common for them that particularity of Woolf’s novels which reflect realization of dependent status in modern literature and the world. This is exactly what is stated to postulate the political and social criteria as the last point of her quests made by the writer in frames of her novels. Even in her programmed essay, named as “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”, Woolf selected a woman as a heroine of a hypothetical literary work and stated that the Edwardian writers like, A. Bennett, J. Galsworthy, G. Wales are not able to make up a character on the pages of their novels and that it is because of the literary methods they used but not the differences in sex and social backgrounds. Moreover, Woolf directly points out their faults saying, “Edwardians has never been interested in the characters or the book. They have been interested in something beyond its limits,” (23) with those out-of-text realities which are postulated by feministic groups as the “main interest” for Virginia Woolf.

We can see that she is remade into an Edwardian comparing to the one she was actually before. In the local literature, the assessment of the English writer’s works can be found in the third volume of the book called “The history of English Literature” (1958) where Virginia Woolf’s method is merged with the so called psychological school method, “Life has a meaning of self-sufficiency, and human’s social performance is something secondary or that does not exist, reluctance or inability to discover the mechanisms of social life, social relationships and conflicts, all these things cause typical features of the literary works written by the writers of the psychological school, and those features are lack of plot, start and outcome, consequently and inherently developing actions.” (24). Woolf’s books were critically viewed because the above mentioned “reluctance and inability to discover the mechanisms of social life” automatically brought her to invisible ideological barriers”

In the monography “English novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 1918-1939”, published in 1965, D.G. Jantieva pointed out once again the lack of saturated line of events in the English writer’s novels, seeing this as an imperfection of her methods, “Woolf has got the people and phenomenon “free” from circumstances of life. There is no motion in the events of the plot of her novel which reveal the meaning of the conflict of life and the composition is mainly directed to the external correlations.”(25). However, N.P. Mihalskaya, in her book “Paths of Development of English Literature” in the 1920’s and 1930’s: Losing and seeking the hero.”, published a year later, directly states that the English writer’s special creative features are strongly connected with a different type of interpretation of the reality comparing to a realistic novel, “in her mind, to enlighten the reality means to convey subjective feelings, the character’s emotions. She thinks that the duty of arts must be a description of the flow of various everlasting impressions in all their contrasting complication.”(26)

The next impulse to study Virginia Woolf’s heritage was seen in the translations of the some of her books into Russian language forestalled as usual with the introducing words of E. Genieva, for example, for the translation of the novel “To the lighthouse” published in the magazine “Foreign literature”, N9, for the year 1991, and the preface of “Truth of fact and truth of view” in one volume edition of Virginia Woolf’s “Collected” works (Moscow, 1989). Here main emphasis is made on the significance of the form of Woolf’s books, including the absence of the plot in the novel “Mrs. Dalloway”, “Although the rules of narration are followed, actually, there is absence of traditional line of events. As a matter of fact, the events, which must be a part of a classical novel, are almost not included here. (27).

## CONCLUSION

In 1988, T. Zalite’s article “Mind flow as a method of characteristics: V. Woolf, the novel “Mrs Dalloway” was published in “The Scientific notes of Tartu State University(the works on Roman-German Philology” edition 792). In 1990, several articles were published by the authors like, N.P. Olshanskaya “Problems of morality in V. Woolf’s novel “The Years” (in the collection “Problems of morality in foreign literature”, Perm, 1990), N.K. Ilina “Stories about Virginia Woolf and O. Huxley” (in the collection “Modification of artistic systems in the historical-literary process”, Sverdlovsk, 1990), N.I. Bushmanova “V. Woolf’s literary essay writing in the tradition of English essay” which was included in the collection “Time and the writer’s artistic personality” (Yaroslavl, 1990) and accordingly a part of a same named dissertation. In 1992, her tutorial book “English modernism: psychological prose” (Yaroslavl, 1992) in which she writes about the two writers V.Woolf and D.H. Laurens. In 1994, a new tutorial book “Modernism: Literature in Austria, England, Germany” (Moscow, 1994) appears which included the chapter written by N.P. Mihalskaya about Woolf. In the next year, L.V. Modenkova defended her dissertation titled as “Virginia Woolf’s early prose (1915-1922): The problems of psychological analysis.” And finally in 1977, N.P. Mihalskaya presents a meaningful review about Woolf in her biographical sketch dedicated to the English writer. (28). The books about the history of English literature written by the authors like, G.V.Anikina, N.I.Bushmanova, M.I.Voropanova, A.A.Elistratova, D.G.Jantieva, V.V.Ivasheva, N.P.Mihalskaya, N.A.Solovyova, M.V. and D.Urinovs, S.N.Filyushkina can be an outstanding example of a historical and literary analysis.

Thus the main direction and the line of events become obvious in V.Woolf’s experiments carried out on the forms of novels, also, it is seen in the formation and practical implementation of her writing strategy and these things were the most important purposes of this article.

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Virginia Woolf was born in a family with high literary and cultural standards. Her literary career began in 1905 when she started writing critical reviews in the Times Literary Supplement and in some other periodicals. Contribution of such reviews and essays to literary journals for a decade or so gave her sufficient training in literary craft and enabled her to acquire a certain maturity of outlook. After her marriage with Leonard Woolf they started the Hogarth Press in 1917 which published the writings of eminent men of letters of the day. She also liberally contributed to this Press. She also wrote a fairly good number of short stories of considerable merit. Her first novel *The Voyage Out* came out in 1915 and others followed. Her last novel was published posthumously in 1941.