**A Different Virginia Woolf: Her First “Novel”**

Irina-Ana Drobot[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract**: The purpose of this paper is to examine what Cecil Woolf (the publisher) believes to be “Virginia Woolf's first ‘novel’ - hitherto unpublished” and to compare it to Woolf’s novels we all know today. Its title is *A Cockney’s Farming Experiences*. It is very short and contains nothing of Woolf's famous stream-of-consciousness. It is a traditional story, a humorous one. It is about a young couple who decides to live on a farm, although they know nothing about farming. The husband, especially, does all sorts of blunders. The novel is made up of two parts - their life as a couple and afterwards their life after they have a baby. The paper uses a narratological perspective to compare this novel to a traditional one. The definition of a traditional novel is the one used by Woolf in her essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*.

**Key-words**: narratology, traditional novel, humour, action.

**Virginia Woolf as we know her: as a Modernist**

For those who know Virginia Woolf as a representative figure of Modernism, reading her first “novel” comes as something unexpected. The difference in style is striking. Her first “novel” seems very much in contrast with all the innovations of Modernism and with her distinctive lyrical style she is known for.

Woolf’s definition of the lyrical novel was formulated in her diaries and essays. Although she did not use this exact term, Virginia Woolf did have her own theory about the lyrical novel. In her diary, in an entry from 1927, she records her intention to use prose poetically. In her view, this new type of novel should contain features of both prose and of poetry. Such prose should also be dramatic, not only poetic, in the sense that the writer will use the influence of music, for instance, to create a dramatic feel. Contradictory and powerful emotions will also be used in the lyrical novel, according to Woolf. In her essay *Modern Fiction*, Woolf writes about a new novel, free from the old conventions, revealing “life as we know it”, as well as “a new mode of perception”. It is in this essay that she gives her definition of the stream-of-consciousness, a definition which begins with her comparison of life to a “luminous halo”, a “semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf 1953: 150-158). Woolf does not use the term “stream-of -consciousness” in *Modern Fiction*. The way Woolf describes her new mode of reality clearly suggests stream-of-consciousness as defined by William James. Ralph Freedman (190) also believes that Woolf was actually defining stream-of-consciousness in this essay.

Woolf, in her essay *Poetry, Fiction and the Future* (Woolf 2008: 81), underlines the importance of psychology in her novels, as compared to traditional novels. She wishes to replace the “psychology of personal intercourse” with something else, such as reflections, dreams, imagination, or poetry. It is also important to consider how feelings are expressed in Woolf’s novels when compared with traditional ones. Woolf’s representation of feelings becomes poetic. The use of imagination in expressing feelings is very close to the use of imagination in Romantic poetry.

Woolf’s lyrical novel is a product of the cultural environment of Modernism. This is because, due to historical conditions and changes in social life, Modernist literature has resorted to previous poetic texts dealing with topics that have always preoccupied humanity. Woolf’s preoccupation with psychology and psychoanalysis was part of her epoch’s general preoccupations. Desire for experimenting with the novel’s form was also part of the general concerns of her time. All arts were preoccupied with these issues, issues which are found in her novels.

Woolf was part of the Bloomsbury Group, together with Roger Fry, a Post-Impressionist painter, among others. Woolf became preoccupied with his style of painting. She adapted his technique of viewing an object differently according to where it is situated and what other objects are next to it into her writings. In her novels, we find multiple perspectives on the same character, incident, and place. Impressionism is part of the larger cultural context of Modernism, together with other trends such as expressionism (Cahoone 7). Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness ought to be regarded as an Impressionist painting of emotion (Roe and Sellers 164-190); therefore the idea that Modernism includes Impressionism in its larger context leads to the idea that painting and literature, word and image, have many common points, that they influence each other, and that certain ideas may be expressed in both mediums in a similar way. It is generally accepted that Impressionism in painting has had a great impact on Modernist thought. If we think about features of Impressionist painting - such as unexpected visual angles, the importance of movement, topics taken from everyday life, and the focus on the passage of time - then we realize their presence in the stream-of-consciousness style of Woolf’s novels.

Ralph Freedman (202) in *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, André Gide, and Virginia Woolf* mentions David Daiches’ definition of the lyrical novel (referring to Virginia Woolf): “her method [...] is to ‘...distill a significance out of the data discovered by the personal sensibility and, by projecting that significance through the minds of others, to maintain an unstable equilibrium between lyrical and narrative art’”. Freedman points to features of the lyrical novel in Woolf such as the focus on inner life, the “conversion of character and scene into symbolic imagery” (187), the “attempt to translate the traditional forms of the novel into organized explorations of consciousness” (187-188), the process of depersonalization of the self, and “the impact of the external world upon the inner life,” which is the process of awareness (191). The self, especially in respect to its relation to the world, is a very important concept in Woolf’s novels. Woolf’s novels focus on the characters’ subjective perception. This characteristic is specific to Modernist novelists. Harriett Feenstra (63-79) places Woolf in the context of a “Modernist mode of thought and perception” by comparing the notion of self as used by Woolf to that of Katherine Mansfield – actually, “hundreds of selves.” Feenstra claims that Woolf and Mansfield used the same Modernist aesthetic of the self. By “hundreds of selves,” or “multiple selves,” both Woolf and Mansfield meant the rejection of “the notion of a stable or fixed self-identity.” The identity of the self is thus fragmented. This idea is supported by Virginia Woolf’s non-traditional novel-form, which lacks a coherent narrative. According to Ali Güneş (185), the fragmented self in Woolf’s novels may achieve unity through memory, which unites past and present selves. In Güneş’ opinion, Woolf’s representation of the self is both fragmented and whole. Such a conception about the self or about identity is also present in the lyrical poetry of the Romantics, as Güneş mentions. This brings Woolf’s novels close to the lyrical mode. It also demonstrates that identity may be reconstructed through memories. By examining the past, characters come to understand what happened, what caused the present situation and what caused them to be who they are at the present moment.

**Virginia Woolf as a traditional novelist?**

All Woolf’s experiments with plot make her first “novel” seem it was written by someone else, at first sight. Virginia Woolf wrote this first “novel” when she was only ten years old. Cecil Woolf (the publisher) claims that this is “Virginia Woolf’s first ‘novel’ - hitherto unpublished.” The novel is made up of two parts: *A Cockney’s Farming Experiences*, which is about the life of a couple who decides to live on a farm, although they know nothing about farming, and afterwards a sequel, *The Experiences of a Pater-Familias*, which is about their life after they have a baby. The reason why this “novel” written by a ten-year-old retains attention is because it is “remarkably sophisticated for a child of that age,” according to its review on the site amazon.com (see http://www.amazon.com/dp/B000F7GTHG). This novel was published by Leonard Woolf’s nephew Cecil Woolf, in the Bloomsbury Heritage Series. Suzanne Henig, who writes an *Introduction* to this edition, states that this ‘novel’ appeared in an issue of the children’s newspaper (Monday, 22 August 1892, vol. ii, no. 32) and “seems to have commenced under the joint authorship of Virginia and Thoby” (Woolf 5). According to Henig, Thoby helped Virginia until Chapter II.

In the first story, the young couple tries to adapt to farm life. The husband does all sorts of blunders. Harriet, his wife, is portrayed as a maternal figure, as Suzanne Henig notices. What is more, Harriet is the more domineering member of the couple. Their financial situation is quite difficult until a rich relative dies and leaves them an inheritance. In the second story, the husband again does plenty of blunders with the baby. He doesn’t know how to take care of him; he didn’t seem to want him in the first place. Yet, he loves his wife and they go through all sorts of funny moments. She even plays a trick on him after he leaves the baby hung on a tree to dry after he fell. At some point the husband pretends to be sick while his wife, in her turn, pretends to be talking to a man with whom she talks as if she were cheating on him. In fact, she just talks to thin air as he find out. The first story has six chapters, while the second one has ten chapters. The stories are told from a first-person point of view, that of the husband. Here we discover a humorous story, where the action is external and chronological. This “novel” is opposed to what we know Woolf for: a Modernist.

This first “novel” shows a contrast to Virginia Woolf’s theory about the new novel she wished to create. In her diary, Woolf comments on the mixture of genres, of poetry and prose, as well as on the difference between the presentation of story in her novel, as compared to traditional novels. Her story in her first “novel” describes external incidents in a traditional way. The focus on the plot here is visible right from the start:

“I am a Cockney by birth and so is my wife but when we married we decided to purchase a small farm in Buckinghamshire and cultivate it ourselves. This was a very imprudent step as we knew nothing of farming but we were then lately married and very energetic and hopeful. The day after we arrived at the farm my wife Harriet set me to milk the cow.” (Woolf 15)

We notice, however, the use of the first-person narrative which brings the main character, emotionally speaking, close to us readers. We do sympathize with him, just as we do with the characters in her later works. However, the story is told clearly, with nothing left to readers to interpret, to try to see the reality beyond the poetic language. Young Woolf simply tells us a good story – in a traditional way. Even if the character may tell his story retrospectively, there is not the same powerful return to the past in order to understand one’s present situation as in *Mrs. Dalloway*. We do not feel the same force of dilemmas. Even though the main character faces difficulties, he does not regard them as insurmountable. We do not feel the same grief as in Woolf’s later novels. The main character does tell his story like a confession to us readers, yet his style is not poetic. We cannot compare him to the Romantic poet who confesses to his readers since his style is just narrative and humorous, not poetic. After the beginning of this first “novel,” we keep reading expecting a good story, with beginning, middle and end. We do not expect poetic descriptions of states of mind.

**The relevance of narratological theories**

Narratological theories can show the difference in the examination of the structure of the lyrical novel, which is the new type of novel Woolf wished to create, and her first novel. Readers may perceive the lyrical novel in different ways, may interpret it differently: at some point they feel there is no plot, that the story advances slowly, or that the story was actually there all along. The reader gets to choose what she sees in a lyrical novel and what is actually there on paper, the way the writer created it. It is the character who tells his part of the story that holds together a sometimes apparently disconnected narrative. The main story of the lyrical novels (which is composed of the characters’ present) can be formed, in turn, of other stories, which harken back to different genres. Some such embedded texts are closer to poetry; others are closer to tragedies. A sense of the various levels of time and the way it is felt in the stories told in Woolf’s novels is given by the term fabula, and is defined as the story with no artistic work done by the writer. The fabula refers to those incidents which occur to the novels’ characters, arranged in a logical and chronological way, even if they do not appear arranged in this very coherent way by the writers in their finished products, the novels. The fabula is just the “raw material of the story,” as Paul Cobley explains. The writer will organize this raw material to suit his artistic purposes.

The term traditional novels makes reference to the novels Woolf mentioned in opposition to the novels she wished to create and the novels she criticized in her essays *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, *Modern Novels*, *Character in Fiction* and *Modern Fiction*. The way reality was viewed had changed, and, with it, the way reality was represented in novels had to change too. Woolf referred to the traditional novel as the Edwardian novel, and she felt she had to break with this tradition[[2]](#footnote-3). The problem with the Edwardian representation of life and human character lies in the lack of focus on psychology. Woolf, in *The Common Reader*, claims that reading means recording “the pattern, however disconnected in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (Woolf 155). According to Linda Martin (1), this is “a mission distorted when novelists focus on neat structure or coherent storylines”. To write a novel that reflects the workings of the human mind requires a new method. This is why a traditional novel is regarded as representing chronologically ordered incidents, while a Modernist novel is regarded as making use of flashbacks in the way the story is told. Moreover, the plot, in its definition of logical connections between incidents, is to be the work of the reader. In a traditional novel, the structure is well-ordered and the incidents in the story are told in a chronological way. This means that the story in the traditional novel is, in terms of logic, closer to the level of the fabula, while in the Modernist novel, the level of the fabula is to be reconstructed by an active reader from her understanding of the story. Woolf rejects the idea of order in the Modernist epoch, claiming the human mind does not always work in an ordered way.

Yet in her first “novel,” Woolf accepts the traditional way a story is told. There is no poem that the reader can reconstruct in her first “novel.” As Henig claims, “In *A Cockney’s Farming Experiences*, one is always certain of reality.” (Woolf 14) She illustrates the traditional type of plot in her humorous story. The story in the traditional novel is, in terms of logic, closer to the level of the fabula, while in the Modernist novel, the level of the fabula is to be reconstructed by an active reader from her understanding of the story. In her first “novel,” the level of the fabula does not differ significantly if at all from the level of story. According to Henig, “a marvelous sense of movement […] pervades the work. The movement is particularly interesting in view of the fact that she complained in her diary in later years of spending so many difficult hours trying to move her characters from one room to another in her fiction.” (Woolf 5) Henig also draws our attention to the way Woolf “constructs her tension at the conclusion of each ‘chapter’ in such a way that interest in wholly sustained until the commencement of the story with the internal transition to succeeding chapters. She is thus very carefully plotting her story” (Woolf 5).

**The relationships between characters**

With respect to the way relationships are portrayed in Woolf’s work, Henig notices the following: “the shrew-wife and the well-meaning but docile husband stereotypes never reappeared in her mature fiction.” (Woolf 11) However, we can say that the relationship between the husband and wife in Woolf’s first “novel” resembles up to a point those found in her later novels. There are misunderstandings in the couple’s life. Such misunderstandings are also found within the family in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mr. Ramsay is, at some point, quite harsh to Mrs. Ramsay. Even in Woolf’s first “novel” we notice the lack of communication between husband and wife when the man in the sequel tells the reader that he does not want the baby. The problems with communication between husband and wife are also there in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway*. Of course, the reasons differ. Yet, even parents-children problems appear in her first “novel” – the problem of the unwanted baby for the husband. The tense relationship between James Ramsay and his father comes to mind at this point. However, there is a difference in the way these misunderstandings are treated. In her mature novels, Woolf treats such misunderstandings in a pessimistic, close to tragic way. The ending of the misunderstandings in her first “novel” is a happy one. Even the misunderstandings are treated lightly and humorously in her first “novel.” The light tone used in the treatment of relationship issues is similar to the one in *Night and Day*, where couples come together or grow apart according to the way they are compatible with each other.

Some other element can be regarded as announcing the mature novels of Woolf: the quoting of Shakespeare, as the husband calls his child Alphonso, “although he despises the name” just to give into his wife (p. 10). The use of other texts in Woolf’s first “novel” has to do with depicting the relationship between husband and wife. The humorous situations also remind loosely of Shakespearean comedies, in this sense anticipating her use of drama in *Night and Day*. Harriet, the wife, can be seen as some sort of shrew. However, in a subversive manner, it is the husband who needs to be taught a lesson, since he also has some shrewish traits. He does not seem willing to be serious in his role of a husband and take his responsibilities.

**Conclusions**

As Henig claims, a writer’s early writings are interesting to study since it is believed that they anticipate the mature writer’s works. A light, humorous tone is visible in Woolf’s first “novel”, in her depiction of the characters’ view of their relationship. This tone is kept in her novel which are seen by critics as closer to traditional ones – *Night and Day*. However, in *Night and Day* the light tone is only partial. Characters have darker reflections on relationships; their mood is more pessimistic at times. In Woolf’s mature works, the problems characters face in their relationships are depicted in a more pessimistic, tragic way. Characters like Septimus and Lucrezia are perceived as tragic characters, since their story reminds readers of the Aristotelian tragedy. The ending of her first “novel” is happy, the mood is lighthearted and humorous; from her mature works, only *Night and Day* has a similar happy ending. The use of other works is visible in the portion where she uses the name Alphonso – an anticipation of the Modernist use of intertextuality.

As is believed, a writer’s first work differs from but also anticipates some of his/her mature works’ techniques. Woolf makes no exception. What is more, this first “novel” shows us what would have happened if Woolf had been a realist, traditional novelist.

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1. Irina-Ana Drobot is Junior Teaching Assistant at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Department of Foreign Languages and Communications (teaching English) since October 2007. She obtained her Ph.D. degree in Literature in March 2014. The title of her dissertation is “Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift: The Lyrical Novel” (advisor Professor Lidia Vianu). Other interests include the field of phonology. She has obtained her MA with the dissertation “Varieties of New English: Phonological Features” (supervisor Professor Andrei Avram) and has published papers by developing chapters from it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Woolf wished to break with the tradition of Edwardian writers such as John Galsworthy, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett. Modernism in literature reflects the changes in men’s roles due to technological developments. We may say that Modernist literature, as “the literature of technology” will show features such as “introversion, technical display, internal self-scepticism” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991: 26-27). Matz (2004: 6) believes that “modernization has changed the very nature of reality”, that literature “has to change its very nature”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)