



# Twentieth-Century Fiction I

## 350:355:02

October 22, 2012

Virginia Woolf's

*Mrs. Dalloway*

Guest Lecture

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# Virginia Woolf

## Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

- Along with fiction of Joyce, Stein, and Faulkner, Woolf's is one of the **more difficult** texts we will read
- Considered a “**high modernist**” (as are Joyce, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Stein)
- High modernism characterized by stylistic experimentation



# Virginia Woolf

What are some hallmarks of Woolf's style in *Mrs. Dalloway*?

1. **Stream of consciousness**
2. **Unintrusive & highly mobile 3rd-person narrator**

**(these features are interrelated)**



# Woolf's style in *Mrs. Dalloway*

## 2 Key Characteristics

### 1. **Stream of consciousness**

#### Features of "Stream of Consciousness"

- Narrative level--first or 3rd person?
- Intense focalization (*see 2 below*)  
Attempt to present consciousness
- Linguistic cues of stream of cs. style?



# Woolf's style in *Mrs. Dalloway*

## 2 Key Characteristics

### 1. **Stream of consciousness**

some features (con't.)

- a) **3rd person Narrator (yet 'invisible')**
- b) **focalization**--multiple characters

Attempt to (re-) present consciousness

Ventriloquism (as with Joyce)



# Woolf's style in *Mrs. Dalloway*

## 2 Key Characteristics

### 1. Stream of consciousness (con't.)

#### c) Linguistic cues

- ▣ **Parataxis** (as with Hemingway)

  - a-grammaticality or loose grammar

  - fragments

  - avoids hierarchies of thought (syntax)



# Beginning as Case in Point

**M**rs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" — was that it? — "I prefer men to cauliflowers" — was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace — Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished — how strange it was! — a few sayings like this about cabbages.

## Ex. of Woolf's Stream of Cs.

What linguistic cues do you see that represent the flow of “consciousness” as if in a stream of thought?

*Ex. From Page 1: Sentence Sequence 1:*

**What a lark!** **What a plunge!** for so it had always seemed to her, when, **with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now,** she had burst open the French windows and **plunged** at Bourton into the open air.

## Ex. of Woolf's Stream of Cs.

*Ex. From Page 1: Sentence 2:*

**How fresh, how calm,** stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; **like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave;** chill and sharp and yet **(for a girl of eighteen as she then was)** solemn, feeling as she did, **standing** there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; **looking** at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them **and** the rooks rising, falling; **standing and looking** until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" -- **was that it?** -- "I prefer men to cauliflowers" -- **was that it?** He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace -- **Peter Walsh.**



# Why this style?

“Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions ... from all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday...”

--Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”



# Why this style?

“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 scores upon the consciousness.”

--Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”



# Why this style?

“Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.”

--Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”



# First Page at a Glance...

**M**rs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" — was that it? — "I prefer men to cauliflowers" — was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace — Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished — how strange it was! — a few sayings like this about cabbages.



# Beginning *Mrs. Dalloway*

***How do the first two paragraphs ...***

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach.



# Beginning *Mrs. Dalloway*

***... compare to the third?***

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; men to cauliflowers” was that it?



# Summary: Woolf's Style

1. Stream of consciousness to depict the impressions of the mind (of the characters).

- parataxis as a principle for whole novel

To show “actual” mental process as well as content (thoughts)

To make a political “argument”



# Summary: Woolf's Style

## 2. Invisible, third-person narrator

- that is mobile, restless

intensive & extensive use of free-indirect discourse:

leaps from mind to mind

can also be objective, grammatical

- spatial proximity is governing principle

Free-association



# Another Woolf

from *To the Lighthouse* (1927):

[ Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty. ]

**What elements we have discussed thus far do you recognize in this passage?**

# Another Woolf

[ Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, *but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before*, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty. ]

- *death of character (protagonist!) is literally bracketed*
- *also presented in an aside [parataxis]*

*doubly de-centered from narrative focus*



# Modern(ist) Fiction

*How does the style of Woolf's 20th C. modern fiction compare with the realist 19th C. novel?*

## DISCUSSION:

Compare the first page of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) with the first page of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)



# Modern(ist) Fiction

## DISCUSSION:

Compare the beginning of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) with the beginning of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

Aim to find **2 contrasts** and **1 similarity**.



# Beginning of *P&P*

## Chapter 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.



# Beginning of *Mrs. D*

**M**rs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" — was that it? — "I prefer men to cauliflowers" — was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace — Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished — how strange it was! — a few sayings like this about cabbages.



# *Mrs. D vs. P&P*

Some Conclusions?



# *Mrs. D vs. P&P*

Some Conclusions:

1. chapter heading vs. no chapter heading
2. intrusive vs. invisible narrator
3. clear demarcation between narrator and characters



# *Mrs. D vs. P&P*

Some Conclusions:

1. chapter heading vs. no chapter heading

fluid structure and texture of narrative text

like the mind and its stream of consciousness

or parataxis at the level of the text  
neutral principle of organization  
juxtaposition, not hierarchy



# *Mrs. D vs. P&P*

More Conclusions:

2. invisible vs. intrusive narrator

no moral center of gravity as in Austen

- Intensive/extensive use of free-indirect discourse in Woolf vs. clear narrator/character separation



# *Mrs. D vs. P&P*

More Conclusions:

3. multiples perspectives & fluidity in switching between them

***focalization*** of individual characters and crowd mind (car, airplane episodes)



# Relationship of Style to Politics?

Woolf extends the use of *parataxis*--***not only the lists and phrases that appear within a single sentence but also the many scenes that follow without immediate rationale***--to the insubordinate arrangement of political imperatives and everyday pleasures.

--Walkowitz ("Woolf's Evasion," 93)



# Relationship of Style to Politics?

In *Mrs Dalloway* parataxis serves to evade a “sense of proportion,” which functions in the novel as a rule of thought, society, and speech.

--Walkowitz (“Woolf’s Evasion” (93)



# Beyond Woolf's Style

“Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.”

--Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”



# The Politics of Content

What are some things that are considered “small” in the novel?

What are some things that are considered “big”?

Consider the beginning of the novel (again!).

What scale of human reality is Woolf privileging?



# Politics in Style & Content

***What are some things that are considered “small” in the novel?***

- Party, Flowers
- Walking on the street

***What are some things that are considered “big”?***

- World War I, shell shock, professions  
(men: medical, military, etc. )
- “sense of proportion” or big-picture thinking

***What scale of human reality is Woolf privileging?***



# Woolf's Politics

- Pacifism, anti-fascism, anti-nationalism  
(*Three Guineas*, 1938)
- Feminism (*A Room of One's Own*, 1929)



# Woolf's Politics

Woolf's feminist and pacifist critique of what counts as "big" or "important" especially given the aftermath of WWI

Those with a "sense of proportion" led to irrational rationality of war, then-unprecedented mass carnage



# Woolf's Politics

BUT: Characters in *Mrs D.* may not share Woolf's politics--read closely!

Narrator won't tell you who is "right" or "wrong"

- invisible and unintrusive
- no moral center of gravity is imposed from outside through omniscient narr.

Characters themselves are not simply "right" or "wrong"  
(Peter, Clarissa, Sally)