

Virginia Woolf: "Kew Gardens" and "The Legacy"

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Virginia Woolf's reputation as a towering literary figure rests largely on her novelistic output, yet she was also an accomplished writer of short fiction. While short-story writing played an important role for her throughout her career, she published relatively few works of short fiction in her lifetime. *Monday or Tuesday*, which came out from the Woolfs' own Hogarth Press in 1921 (as its first full-length publication), was the only collection of short stories she ever published. In 1940 she began to contemplate putting together another book of short fiction, which became the posthumous *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (1944), edited and published by her husband Leonard. It included six of the eight stories from *Monday or Tuesday*, seven stories that had appeared in periodicals, and five previously unpublished pieces.

Criticism of Woolf's short fiction has been scarce, especially compared with the vast amount of critical attention bestowed on her novels. Few articles have been devoted to it, and critical studies and biographies tend to ignore or quickly pass over what they see as a sideshow to the author's core business of writing novels. This situation has changed somewhat since the publication of Susan Dick's *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1985; second edition 1989), which identified and included no fewer than forty-six complete works and a dozen incomplete ones. This authoritative edition managed to bring new attention to Woolf's achievement in short fiction, which forms the topic of three subsequently published book-length studies (Baldwin 1989; Benzel and Hoberman 2004; Skrbic 2004). Her stories are now no longer regarded as mere finger exercises, but as fully fledged literary works worthy of critical attention in their own right. However, despite the recent upsurge in critical interest, it remains true to say that Woolf's reputation as a short-story writer is "still emerging" (Baldwin 1989: xiii).

Confining ourselves to the stories collected in *Monday or Tuesday* and *A Haunted House*, we can divide Woolf's short fiction into three chronological periods (Baldwin 1989: 4–6): a radically experimental period, in which her concern with knowledge

and perception led her to push the short-story form to its limits (1917–21); a period in which her main interest was in portraying the inner lives of characters associated with Mrs Dalloway's party (1923–9); and a remarkably conventional period, in which she employed traditional plot devices (1939–41). The variety and range of Woolf's short fiction is exemplified by the two stories that we will take a closer look at in the remainder of this chapter: the highly experimental "Kew Gardens" and the more conventional "The Legacy," written respectively near the beginning and near the end of her career.

"Kew Gardens"

Many critics have asserted that Woolf's short stories were testing grounds for themes and methods that she would take up and develop more fully in her novels. This is particularly true for the early, experimental phase of her career as a short-story writer, during which she produced two of her most famous stories: "The Mark on the Wall," which was published along with Leonard Woolf's "Three Jews" in *Two Stories* (1917), the first publication of the newly founded Hogarth Press; and "Kew Gardens," which was published as a small book by the Hogarth Press, with woodcut illustrations by Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell (1919). These two stories, along with "An Unwritten Novel" (1920), all of which were included in the volume *Monday or Tuesday*, led directly to *Jacob's Room* (1922), the first of her truly experimental novels. While Woolf initially saw "The Mark on the Wall" as no more than a playful distraction from the serious work of writing her long, conventional second novel *Night and Day* (1919), her diary shows that by January 1920 she had come to envisage "mark on the wall, K[ew]. G[ardens]. & unwritten novel" as "taking hands & dancing in unity" to form a radically new kind of fiction (Dick 1996). In fact, "Kew Gardens" is often singled out as a kind of ur-text of Woolf's literary corpus. In his memoirs, Leonard Woolf refers to it as "a microcosm of all [Woolf's] then unwritten novels, from *Jacob's Room* to *Between the Acts*" (Staveley 2004: 42–3). The critic John Oakland concurs that the story "contains in embryo many of the issues of form, theme, content, character, plot and action which occupied [Woolf] in all her work" (Oakland 1987: 264).

While "The Mark on the Wall" and "An Unwritten Novel" both revolve around the fanciful flight of the narrator's mind, the organizing principle of "Kew Gardens" is setting rather than character. A third-person narrator describes the goings-on on a July day in and around a flower bed in Kew Gardens, a public garden situated on the south bank of the River Thames which became a place of respite for the author after the Woolfs' move to Richmond in 1915. The narrator's attention alternates between the world of the flower bed, in which a snail is struggling to get past a leaf, and the thoughts and conversations of four couples passing by it. The characters are rather sketchy, and not a single thread of the story is narrated to completion. In

addition to being utterly banal, the "progress" of the snail, the only consistent character, is not even recounted in full. The determinism of character-based plot development, that mainstay of realist narrative, has been superseded by the arbitrariness of spatial and temporal contiguity: what is narrated is narrated for no other reason than that it is what happens to occur in a given space within a given period of time. "Kew Gardens" challenges the traditional assumption that a short story must be unified and provide a sense of closure, thereby underlining the author's claim – in a 1919 review of a volume of stories by Chekhov – that "We are by this time alive to the fact that inconclusive stories are legitimate" (Benzel and Hoberman 2004: 4).

That, despite its fixed and tightly circumscribed setting, the story retains a distinctly dynamic feel is due in no small part to Woolf's experimentation with narrative perspective, one of the story's most original and subversive formal features. The flexibility of Woolf's narrative style is noticeable from the first paragraph, which begins with but soon moves beyond a conventional perspective on the garden scene it describes. The opening sentence starts with a description from a middle distance: the narrator is able to see the shape of the flower bed as a whole ("oval-shaped" (Woolf 1989: 90)), but also to discern individual flowers ("perhaps a hundred stalks" (90)). As the sentence continues, however, we move closer and closer, and by the end we can make out even the minutest component parts of the flowers: "from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end" (90). The point of view gradually moves inside the flower bed as the paragraph goes on to describe the sunlight falling on the earth between the flowers. A breeze is said to stir the petals "overhead" (90), indicating that we are now down on the ground with the snail which is introduced here and whose slow progression across the base of the flower bed will become the focus of the narrator's interest. That we have literally come to adopt a snail's eye view by the end of the first paragraph explains why the area between the flower stalks through which the light makes its way is described as "the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves" (90): what appears small to us is huge to a snail. This snail's eye view also manifests itself elsewhere in the story: depicted with corresponding size and perspective, the puddles, grass, pebbles, and leaves which the snail finds on its path become "[b]rown cliffs with deep green lakes in the hollows, flat blade-like trees that waved from root to tip, round boulders of grey stone, vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture" (92).

The perspectival shift that occurs in the first paragraph is reversed in the final paragraph, in which the narrative focus expands to include the entire city. The visual field widens as we are lifted up into the air – the drone of an airplane flying over Kew Gardens is mentioned at this point. From this distant aerial perspective, the human beings down in the garden appear as mere blurs upon the horizon, "dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere" (95). Even Kew Gardens itself, when viewed from a sufficient distance, is only one of "a vast nest of Chinese boxes"

(95) that make up the modern metropolis. Besides unsettling our accustomed perception of a landscape, "Kew Gardens" also contains the seeds of the kind of stream-of-consciousness narration for which Woolf's later prose would become famous. The story smoothly shifts between descriptions of the garden from the perspective of the snail and scenes in which the narrator adopts the points of view and enters the minds of the people who are passing by. As Susan Dick points out, "Such carefully patterned shifts of perspective, which occur throughout *Jacob's Room*, became a hallmark of Woolf's fiction" (Dick 1996).

The opening and closing paragraphs of "Kew Gardens" display not only the story's experimentation with narrative perspective, but also its affinity with visual art. In fact, the story's multiperspectivalism can itself be seen as a literary appropriation of a technique used in post-impressionist painting, to which Woolf had been introduced by her friend Roger Fry. "Kew Gardens" is often regarded by critics as a piece of verbal impressionism, an attempt "to capture in prose the way in which the light falls upon the flowers, pebbles, snails, drops of water" (Gordon 1984: 65). Like a modern painter, Woolf seeks to convey the immediate experience of reality rather than offering a representation of it, and does so by recording impressions of color and light. The first paragraph provides an elaborate description of the flowers – unidentified, as in a painting – which abounds with sensory details about the play of light and the diffusion of color, e.g., "when [the petals] moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour" (Woolf 1989: 90). No less visually charged is the last paragraph, which depicts the dissolution of "substance and colour" as all life in the garden seems to evanesce: "Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men, women and children, . . . wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue" (95). Another notable formal feature, which makes Woolf's prose even more sensuous and lyrical, is the abundant use of figurative language. Personifications, metaphors, and similes are scattered about the story, many of these blurring the boundaries between the human and the non-human world. The snail is personified, but so are the flowers, which are given "heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves," "throat[s]," and "flesh" (90); the men and women straggling past the flower bed are compared to butterflies, horses, and flowers; and the words they speak are likened to bees.

There is no denying, then, that "Kew Gardens" is a highly formalist story. However, one should be wary of overemphasizing form at the expense of content – a pitfall which, alas, few critics have managed to avoid. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* on the first appearance of "Kew Gardens," Harold Child praised this "new proof of the complete unimportance in art of the *byle*, the subject matter" (Bishop 1982: 269). Child's review, which led to an outpouring of public interest in the story, set the tone for much of its critical reception, which, as Alice Staveley has recently observed, "reads in large part like a primer for traditional narratology,

its emphasis on form in lieu of content, on universal generalizations about style and method obscuring specific interrogations for how history, gender, and class drive the story's manifold innovations of narrative form" (Staveley 2004: 43). Published in 1919, "Kew Gardens" can be productively read as a response to the shattering experience of World War I, which had discredited the social order inherited from the Victorian era (Johnson 2001). Far from being a neutral setting, the garden at Kew is a potent symbol of national imperial history – its mission, after all, was not only to attract visitors, but also to collect and display botanical specimens gathered from Britain's many colonies. Woolf's decision to set her story in this iconic site – which, moreover, being a garden, inevitably conjures Edenic connotations – allowed her effectively to portray and critique a world which had lost its innocence.

By privileging the perspective of an animal, dissolving the boundaries between human and non-human, and generally decentring the human presence, "Kew Gardens" gives literary expression to the dehumanizing effects of the war and the politics that propelled it. The world depicted in the story is marked by fragmentation and alienation (Séllei 1997). Having lost its bearings and its moorings, humanity seems condemned to wander senselessly through a disjointed world, following an "irregular and aimless movement" (Woolf 1989: 95). Though the passers-by are paired together, they do not actually connect with one another. Divided by disparate pasts, lost in separate thoughts, and talking past each other, they appear to be irrevocably isolated and incapable of meaningful communication. In fact, the story's social commentary manifests itself most explicitly in the fragmentarily recorded dialogs between the couples, which have tended to be overlooked by the critics (Staveley 2004: 43). World War I casts its shadow over the two central conversations, the one between a seemingly crazy old man and his younger male companion (presumably his son or keeper), and the one between two elderly women, possibly domestic servants. Delusional and rambling, the old man, who is haunted by "the spirits of the dead" from "this war," with whom he imagines communicating (Woolf 1989: 92), shows symptoms of what appears to be war trauma. This character is a precursor of Septimus Smith, the shell-shocked war veteran in *Mrs. Dalloway* who descends into madness and ends up committing suicide. The war is also present, albeit more obliquely, in the conversation between the two women, who are shown chattering about relatives and recipe ingredients. Their insistent repetition of the word "sugar" can be explained by the fact that sugar was a rationed and therefore precious commodity during the war (Staveley 2004: 56).

The story appears to suggest that the inherited social order has betrayed both men and women: while the conversation featuring the old man invokes the carnage into which the nation's young men had been sent by their government, the other three conversations foreground the crippling limitations imposed on women's lives by social conventions. Confined to the domestic sphere, the two women engaging in empty chatter find themselves in a position of economic dependence, as do the

female partners in the story's two romantic male-female pairs, who are forced to adopt the subservient roles allotted to women in a patriarchal culture. By subtly linking militarism and patriarchal oppression, "Kew Gardens" anticipates the argument of Woolf's feminist and pacifist essay *Three Guineas* (1938), written some twenty years later, when Europe was facing the prospect of another devastating war.

"The Legacy"

Feminist concerns also inform "The Legacy," which, like other late stories, was commissioned by an American magazine. This transatlantic interest is probably attributable to the success of *The Years* (1937), which had become a best-seller in the United States. Woolf wrote "The Legacy" in 1940 in response to a request from the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. However, much to her anger, he rejected the story, and she did not receive payment for it. "The Legacy" did not appear in print until after Woolf's death, when it was included in *A Haunted House*. The inspiration for the story is thought to have come from Woolf's visit to Philip Morrell shortly after the death of Lady Ottoline Morrell. During this visit, Woolf's host showed her his wife's diaries and pressed her to accept some of Ottoline's jewelry as a remembrance. "The Legacy" is a story in which a wife dies before her husband, leaving little gifts for all her friends and her diaries for him. From these, he learns that she had fallen in love with another man – who turns out to be the brother of her secretary – and committed suicide a week or two after his death. The method of suicide used recalls the death of Woolf's aunt Mary, who was run over by a car, as well as Milly Hamilton's remark, noted down by Woolf in her diary, that she wished she had the courage to step in front of a moving bus (Baldwin 1989: 70).

The fact that the intended audience of "The Legacy" were the editor and the readers of a middle-brow magazine may account for the relative conventionality of the story's form. Unlike with the self-published "Kew Gardens," Woolf appears to have felt a need to make at least some concessions to popular taste while writing "The Legacy." The story strays from the new path for fiction which Woolf had mapped out in her essay "Modern Novels" (1919) in that, like traditional realist fiction, it depends on plot and obeys the laws of probability and coherence. However, it does devote a great deal of attention to the elucidation of character in the manner called for by Woolf in both this essay and her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924). In these polemical pieces, Woolf argues that the methods used by Edwardian novelists like Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells tell us much about the material world of their characters, but fail to capture their soul. In "The Legacy," by contrast, Woolf employs a third-person narrator who gives the reader direct insight into the inner life of the protagonist, Gilbert Clandon, by focalizing the entire narrative through him.

What is more, the story thematizes the necessity of attempting to enter into the minds of other people by "punishing" Gilbert for his self-absorption and his incuriosity about his own wife. A successful politician, Gilbert is portrayed as being self-satisfied, self-centered, and insensitive. He condescends to his wife's secretary and friend Sissy Miller, who comes to visit him after Angela's death to pay her respects. While Angela, "with her genius for sympathy," had discovered numerous qualities in Sissy, to Gilbert "she was scarcely distinguishable from any other woman of her kind" (Woolf 1989: 282). It turns out that he also has trouble reading his own wife as an individual. He pictures her as the archetypal angel in the house: reading through Angela's early diary entries, he fondly remembers her as a charming, innocent, and ignorant little creature, content to bask in his reflected glory. Later entries, which he initially reads with less interest as "his own name occurred less frequently" (285), reveal that Angela had not been fulfilled in that role, and that she had found in another man the love and respect her husband had failed to give her. Gilbert's indignant reaction to these revelations, which betrays nothing but hurt pride, emphasizes his complacency and self-absorption. His thoughts are interspersed with extracts from Angela's diary, which disclose to him (and to the reader) the tragic truth of Angela's life and death. On learning that she would not leave her husband for him, Sissy's brother killed himself, closely followed, in true Antony-and-Cleopatra style, by Angela herself. Her death was not an accident, then, as Gilbert had been assuming (yet another misinterpretation on his part), but a deliberate suicide, a desperate attempt to escape from him and to rejoin her lover. This devastating insight is the "legacy" Angela has left her husband.

Gilbert's crime, if we may call it that, originates in a failure of imagination and a want of sympathy. In this respect, he closely resembles the Edwardian novelists lambasted by Woolf in the aforementioned essays. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she argues that Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells were "never interested in character in itself," but in "something outside" (Baldwin 1989: 86). Woolf makes this point by imagining them attempting in vain to capture in words the singularity of a woman sitting opposite them in a railway carriage, a woman she calls Mrs. Brown. The reason for their failure, Woolf claims, is that "not one of the Edwardians has so much as looked at her" (Baldwin 1989: 89). Her predecessors' obsession with external details diverts their attention away from Mrs. Brown herself, leading them to create "an image of Mrs. Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever" (Baldwin 1989: 95). Woolf even suggests that the Edwardian conventions and tools for portraying character cause "ruin" and "death" (Baldwin 1989: 90). If "Mrs. Brown must be rescued, expressed, and set in her high relations to the world before the train stopped and she disappeared for ever" (Baldwin 1989: 92), it falls on a new generation of modernist writers to carry out this life-saving, liberating, and restoring mission. One of these writers is, of course, the author of "The Legacy," who, sharing the "genius for sympathy" Gilbert attributes to Angela, offers her readers a sensitive and psychologically convincing

portrait of a man whose world has collapsed about him without his quite realizing it yet.

Woolf's critique of the Edwardian novelists, which she translates into fictional practice in "The Legacy," is explicitly gendered and classed. The character Woolf presents in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" as being victimized by the literary establishment is a powerless, impoverished woman, and the guilty party consists of male authority figures. The same power relations prevail in "The Legacy," which paints a bleak and damning picture of the gender and class politics of the time. The class prejudices of the powers that be, represented by Gilbert, show not only in the latter's interactions with Sissy, but also in his imperviousness to the suffering of the lower classes, which Angela wanted to help alleviate, and in his contempt for the socialist ideas and ideals to which – as he learns from her diaries – Angela had been exposed through her contacts with Sissy's activist brother. Even more central to the story than class snobbery, however, is the prevalent attitude towards women and the damage it causes. The fate chosen by Angela demonstrates that the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society can turn women's lives into a prison from which only death seems to provide release. Angela's sense of entrapment recalls the predicament of Clarissa Dalloway, another seemingly contented politician's wife, while her decision to commit suicide links her with Septimus Smith, Clarissa's doppelgänger, who also chooses death over a life of unrelieved misery. "The Legacy" thus bears witness to the havoc which an ingrained lack of empathy and understanding can wreak on people's, and especially women's, lives. As we saw with "Kew Gardens," far from being a retreat into empty formalism, Woolf's recourse to narrative innovation – here, the deployment of techniques for facilitating empathic identification with fictional characters – is rooted in, and prompted by, a particular historical reality which her work critically examines and interrogates.

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