



Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown

Virginia Woolf

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The essay was written in 1923, and in 1924 it was read to the Heretics, Cambridge. The essay is a polemical piece that attempts to go beyond Arnold Bennett's thesis that character is the essence of novel writing, and his too easy conclusion as to why the young writers have failed to create credible characters.

Woolf chooses the year 1910 as the year in which a discernible shift in human relations takes place. This point is important to her because to understand what "real" character is, one has to understand the large context—the British society. In this light, she chooses Mrs. Brown as a metaphor for human nature. Her analysis highlights the shortcomings of previous generations of writers; in particular the Edwardians and the Georgians, concluding that they also failed to create lasting characters. In this regard, history seems to be on Virginia Woolf's side: while everyone remembers Mrs. Dalloway, no one remembers a single character created by either the Edwardians or the Georgians. What readers remember instead are the physical settings they created with old tools.

To facilitate the flow of ideas, this version of the essay includes section headings and bold typography. The essay is presented, otherwise, as it was first published.

Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown Details

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From Reader Review Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown for online ebook

Rakhi Dalal says

Virginia Woolf is mesmerizing as a novelist and as a critic she is delightfully charged with words which convey her ideas in remarkably simple language. Considered as one of the modernist writers, she has given due thought to the art of writing and character depiction in “Modern fiction”. Her essays, *Modern fiction*(1925), *Character in fiction*(1924) and *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*(1923), deal with more or less the same ideas; how to represent character in fiction. And she wonders if modern writers have learnt well enough of the art of writing.

It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better; all that can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle.[Modern Fiction]

In the essay *Modern fiction*, she is quite critical of the writings of Edwardian writers like Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Galsworthy and labels them as materialists, describing their works as disappointing. In *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, she says that they were the most prominent and successful writers in the year 1910. Considering the sheer volume of their work, she observes that they embody an imperfection which takes life away from their works. She is of the opinion that young writers cannot learn anything about writing from these writers. Her words are humorously satirical when she considers how the experience of learning from these writers would be like.

Now it seems to me that to go to these men and ask them to teach you how to write a novel—how to create characters that are real—is precisely like going to a bootmaker and asking him to teach you how to make a watch. Do not let me give you the impression that I do not admire and enjoy their books. They seem to me of great value, and indeed of great necessity. There are seasons when it is more important to have boots than to have watches. To drop metaphor, I think that after the creative activity of the Victorian age it was quite necessary, not only for literature but for life, that someone should write the books that Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy have written. Yet what odd books they are! Sometimes I wonder if we are right to call them books at all. For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque. That done, the restlessness is laid, the book finished ; it can be put upon the shelf, and need never be read again.[Modern Fiction]

Of the three, she is most critical of Bennett and the essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” concentrates upon Bennett’s take upon a fictional character, Mrs. Brown, bearing in mind Bennett’s usual description of characters in his novels.

She begins by telling us an anecdote about an old lady, say, Mrs. Brown whom she met on a journey from Richmond to Waterloo. She tells us about Mrs. Brown’s dialogue with a gentleman seated with her and then she proceeds to tell us what she imagines about her. *I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases. Her husband's medals were on the mantelpiece. She popped in and out of the room, perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long, silent stares.*

And while describing how Mr. Bennett would depict the character, Woolf begins with two assertions:

1. Everyone is a judge of character.
2. On or about December 1910, human character changed.

For her second assertion she says – *“All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910.”**

For her first assertion she begins by saying that everyone, in life, is a judge of character, because one inevitably indulges in character reading when coming across other individuals. And a novelist is different in the sense that he doesn't cease to be interested in a character even when he has learnt enough about the character. But how would Mr. Bennett see a fictional character like Mrs. Brown, a poorly dressed and small woman having an anxious look, who is travelling from Richmond to Waterloo?

While she thinks that Mr. Wells, a proponent for Utopia, will observe her in the manner she ought to be and not as she is, for he forgets that there are no Mrs. Browns in Utopia, Mr. Galsworthy would only see in Mrs. Brown a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner. But Mr. Bennett would observe every detail in the carriage and would write about everything around the character but not about the character or how she feels. This is what makes him the worst culprit because he chooses to ignore the character about whose life he writes a work and indulges in details like where she lives, a view from her window or the people in her lives, perhaps we can hear the voices of all those people in her life but we cannot hear her voice and this is what disappoints.

What can Mr. Bennett be about? I have formed my own opinion of what Mr. Bennett is about—he is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there. With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner. There she sits in the corner of the carriage—that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out—there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature.

Woolf is aware that her thoughts on these writers may be questioned, for how she can opine that the conventions established by Edwardian novelists were wrong. For this, she answers that though the conventional tools set up by those writers might have worked in their age and literature, it is not the case with modern novelists or literature. She understands when Mr. Bennett says that Georgian writers are unable to make us feel that our characters are real, for she realizes that the conventional ways of Georgian writers may act as impediments in expression for subsequent writers.

She then goes on to say that it is true that the modern writers are suffering because they don't have a set of rules/manners to follow which would correlate with their age; an age where you witness breaking and falling, crashing and destruction; an age of experiments – Modern age. But these modern writers like Joyce, Eliot and Forster believe that the novels are in the first place about people and only in the second about the houses they live in. In “Modern Fiction”, she questions the customary (Edwardian or according to accepted conventions) way of depicting life in novels and asks whether life is like this.

*Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impression - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. 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, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer was a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose and not what he must, **if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond street tailors would have it.** 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 consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external if possible?*

This conveyance requires a lot of strength and hence the truth then, when it reaches us is rather chaotic and exhausted. Quoting Ulysses, Queen Victoria and Mr. Prufrock as some names by which Mrs. Brown has become famous, she asks whether or not the reading of Ulysses has made us realize how much of life is excluded or ignored? In the end of this essay, she urges the reader to have a close alliance with writers and tolerate their experiments and failures. She predicts that *we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown.*

Going a step further in "Modern Fiction", she says that the proper stuff of fiction does not exist; everything is a stuff of fiction, every feeling and every emotion, and the spirit of fiction will be renewed if we break her, bully her as well as honor and love her.

Conclusion:

Virginia Woolf has been a proponent of the representation of spirit of characters in novels because she believes that novels (fiction) are essentially about people. In these essays, she has tried to propose what cannot work when there is a transition from one era to another e.g. the conventions of one era may no longer be followed in subsequent era. Though essentially comparing Edwardian and Modern novelists, she has let open a way for further generations to come because the dilemmas and questions faced by writers of each era, at the beginning, remain the same i.e. what and how to represent.

* King Edward died in the year 1910.

Sara says

Interesting as to comprehend Woolf-s poetic...

Bettie? says

Hattip to Masterworks of Early 20th-Century Literature: London 1910 art exhibition

Elizabeth says

Read for my global modernization class

?ima ?m?ir says

"There she sits in the corner of the carriage—that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out—there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very power- fully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window ; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage ; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature."

Pollapollina Books says

Amo Virginia Woolf come scrittrice, ma ancora di più la amo come saggista e critica letteraria, con il suo sarcasmo pungente e la forza delle sue osservazioni. In questo bellissimo volumetto, che affronta i diversi modi con cui un romanziere può costruire la propria opera, il testo a fronte mi ha anche permesso una lettura parallela tra italiano e versione originale (con annesso confronto di come io "interpreto" un termine, spesso diversamente dalla traduttrice).

Clara says

Ok I really loved this. That's all

Kirsty says

Utterly wonderful; so thoughtful, and brilliantly constructed.

Danai Tsouna says

Και αυτό είναι η στιγμή για να διαβ?σει κανε?ς πο?ηση, ?ταν ε?ναι σχεδ?ν ?τοιμος να τη γρ?ψει.

Η επ'δραση της πο?ησης ε?ναι τ?σο ισχυρ? και ?μεση που για μια στιγμ? δεν υπ?ρχει ?λλη α?σθηση εκτ?ς απ? αυτ? του ποι?ματος.

Το βιβλ?ο περιλαμβάνει μια συλλογ? δοκιμ?ων και ?ρθρων της Βιρτζ?νια Γουλφ, στα οπο?α αναφ?ρεται στην τ?χνη της γραφ?ς. Μιλ?ει με πολ? σαρκασμ? και καυστικ?τητα για τους δι?φορους τρ?πους με τους οπο?ους οι συγγραφε?ς επιλ?γουν να συνθ?σουν τους χαρακτ?ρες των μυθιστορημ?των τους, για το π?ς οι αναγν?στες διαβ?ζουν και διαχειρ?ζονται ?να βιβλ?ο και σχολι?ζει τους τρ?πους αφ?γησης πλοκ?ς. Κ?ποιος που ενδιαφ?ρεται να γρ?ψει ?να βιβλ?ο ? να ταξιδ?ψει π?σω στην Αγγλ?α της Γουλφ και να συγκρ?νει τις συγγραφικ?ς συν?θειες της εποχ?ς, σ?γουρα θα απολα?σει αυτ? τη συλλογ? δοκιμ?ων.

Δεν μπορ? να πω ?τι εγ? το απ?λαυσα τ?σο, κυρ?ως γιατ? δεν μπορο?σα να συμβαδ?σω με τους συνειρμο?ς της συγγραφ?ως και τον ?ντονα (?πι)κριτικ? της λ?γο. Ε?μαι β?βαιη ?τι θα κατανοο?σα περισσ?τερα αν ε?χα διαβ?σει και τα βιβλ?α στα οπο?α παραπ?μπει περιστασιακ? η Γουλφ κατ? τον σχολιασμ? της, ? αν τα ?ρθρα αυτ? διαβ?ζονταν στα πλα?σια του μαθ?ματος της Λογοτεχν?ας στο σχολε?ο και ε?χα την αγαπημ?νη μου καθηγ?τρια - φιλ?λογο να μου εξηγε? τις αναφορ?ς και τη συλλογικ? πορε?α της Βιρτζ?νια Γουλφ. ?

Gemma says

Astounding. Enlightening. Amazing. Really at loss for other adjectives to better describe this incredible essay from Virginia Woolf.

Absolutely loved it, from start to finish.

Ali says

What a better way to kick off this year than with some Woolfian wisdom.

A marvelous essay -and may I say a prophecy?- regarding the transition of English literature and its dominant mode of narration from the omniscient narrator to the stream of consciousness.

I recommend these meagre pages to anyone who wants to witness an overflow in his reveries about the purpose of writing a novel.

Laura says

You may read online here.

Page 3:

" The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else. . . . Style counts; plot counts;

originality of outlook counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters. If the characters are real the novel will have a chance ; if they are not, oblivion will be its portion. . . (Mr. Arnold Bennett)

Page 11:

Surely one reason is that the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face—that there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business.

Page 17:

The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him some-thing which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy.

Francesca says

Adoro tutto di lei ma la cosa che amo di più in assoluto sono i saggi. In questo saggio Virginia Woolf si difende dalle accuse che le sono mosse da un altro autore inglese, non saper creare dei personaggi reali. Ho amato l'arguzia con cui Virginia vuole portare il lettore a riflettere e con cui spiega la sua concezione di personaggio di un romanzo. La mancanza di un tono accusatorio ma la semplicità con cui confuta le accuse mosse verso di lei. Come non si può amare una scrittrice così che dà peso a tutto quello che scrive a partire da una semplice lettera, un commento, un articolo. Come sempre fantastica ??

Hannah Cox says

Virginia Woolf is such a character, who knew she could serve so much shade! This should just be titled, 'The Roast of Arnold Bennett'. This is a great short read if you're new to the realist and modernist movements. So before you pick up 'Mrs Dalloway' or any other Virginia Woolf read, this book is really useful to help you wrap your head around Woolf's style. It's also a great analysis of different approaches to characterisation, even Jane Austen gets a mention (yay!).

Romie says

I read this for my British Lit class and omg I loved it so much! I cannot wait to pick up something by Virginia Woolf, because if I already love this essay, then I can only imagine what it will be with one of her books!