

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ETHICS OF THE SHORT STORY

Christine Reynier

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

(By Isabel María Andrés Cuevas. Universidad de Granada)

iandres@ugr.es

173

Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story accomplishes the two major principles its author, Christine Reynier, detects in Woolf's shorter fiction: a well-balanced combination of proportion and intensity. The volume's division into chapters turns it into a comprehensive response to the questions that may arise on approaching Woolf's short stories. Nonetheless, as might be expected from a short story itself, it wisely keeps to a concision that turns it into a direct and effective resource easy to apprehend and enjoy.

Throughout its five chapters, Reynier leads us into the microcosm of Woolf's shorter fiction, where we gradually discover the myriad impressions that compose our understanding of it. Hence, Chapter 1 sets the bases of the conceptual arena where Reynier's discussion will develop by considering Woolf's definition of the short story. Reynier points out a fundamental distinction between what Woolf understands to be two very different types of fiction that will determine the latter's concept of the short story. By referring to Woolf's distinction between French and Russian literature —and therefore, between a focus on reason and formal perfection on the one hand, and a focus on emotional intensity and freedom of form on the other hand— Reynier remarks how Woolf had always favoured the latter type (*Essays IV*: 181-190). This helps us understand how important emotion is in Virginia Woolf's shorter fiction. As Reynier notes, many of her stories rely on a moment of high emotional intensity —a moment of being— when the narrative

goes beyond its fictional borders and reaches the reader, when, as Reynier remarks in Chapter 3, conversation flows between narrator and reader. Yet, even when this interaction takes place, as the author reminds us, Woolf advocates an impersonal mode of writing as a means of ensuring a purer form of literature, free from any preconceptions or expectations on the part of the reader. In order to reach a conclusion about Woolf's notion of the short story, Reynier examines the author's reflections on the genre, as cultivated by Chekhov, Hemingway, or Poe. Nevertheless, rather than merely recapitulating Woolf's essays on short fiction, Reynier shows us how she applied these techniques in her own fiction and in particular how form in her fiction is subordinated to the attainment of that "moment of being".

Once she has exposed those two forces —proportion and intensity of feeling— that are in play in Woolf's shorter fiction, Reynier continues by showing us how the former is put at the service of the latter in different ways. The author distinguishes between those instances in which association of meanings and narrative elements enable the reader to reach that epiphanic moment that is pursued by literary works, as is the case of "Slater's Pins Have No Points". On the other hand, Reynier acknowledges in other examples of Woolf's short stories, the principle of interruption —or the disruption of linearity. In these cases, the author aims to break with the monadism and one-sidedness that characterized Victorian literature, in favour of a more dialogical conception of the literary work (Bakhtin 1984: 122). To achieve this, the very logic of language or reasoning is frequently mocked. In this respect, the book provides enlightening examples from Woolf's stories, such as the apparently incoherent train of thought of an old lady in "Kew Gardens", or the continually digressive and non-linear conversation that takes place between a writer and another character in "The Evening Party".

The book flows naturally and clearly along the major theoretical parameters and thus, Chapter 3 is concerned with the apprehension of Woolf's short stories qua instances of conversation. The use of terms such as "love" and "hate" in order to typify conversational turns in Woolf's shorter fiction proves to be a very convenient way of understanding the different outcomes of the encounters between characters in Woolf's stories. Conversation, as the author lets us know, accurately defines its participants, as well as the demarcations they create around themselves. Reynier illustrates this with the example of the party in Woolf's stories,¹ where those social encounters clearly reflect, like the mirrors at the end of the village pageant in *Between the Acts*, not only the external, but even the very inner reality of its participants —their weaknesses, their jealousies, their deepest emotions. In the same chapter, Reynier explores further aspects of the role of conversation in this shorter fiction. Yet, whether it constitutes a form of interpersonal encounter

or gives the stories their basic structure, Reynier makes it clear that dialogism and the rupture with univocality in narrative is a central maxim at the core of Woolf's short stories. Through conversation, a gate into intertextuality and debate is opened. Consequently, exchange, contrast, contradiction, and polyphony —what Reynier describes as a democratic mode of writing— take over from centralization and the voice of an authoritarian narrator in this fiction.

Continuing with the notion of Woolf's short stories as conversations, Chapter 4 further develops this idea by conceptualizing this shorter fiction as a conversation between reader and writer. The chapter delves into the fact that many stories entail a reflection upon the writing-reading process, especially by acting it out through fiction, or they serve instead as the mainframe for the retelling of another story. Throughout this study, Woolf's shorter narrative works are portrayed as, in many cases, a thorough rethinking of the fiction-writing and reading processes as quasi-magical experiences which end in a sublime moment —a "moment of being". Such a unique instant takes place after reader and author have exchanged something exclusive and delicate that belongs solely to them. This magical conception of the creation and reception of fiction, Reynier notes, is graphically present in Woolf's stories in the form of a mist that envelops the writer, a train cabin that encapsulates them, but also in the form of a visual symbol that gradually develops on a piece of paper at the same time as it develops in the mind of the reader. Puzzled about the ultimate meaning of that symbol, the reader becomes acquainted with the author's innermost feelings and thoughts to achieve that magical moment of sharing. Yet, Reynier simultaneously makes us aware that Woolf always meant to remind us of the absence of conventional ties or Manichaean solutions in honest literature,² an absence released from the necessity of rationalized meaning and, as Reynier highlights in Chapter 2, conveying instead intense emotions.

It is this honesty that leads the author of this short fiction to create ethically committed narratives, as the last chapter of this book lets us know. Throughout this chapter, we rediscover stories populated by sometimes grotesque beings:³ hybrid, in-between creatures that unsettle the reader and, at the same time, aim to convey a deeper meaning beyond conventions. Reynier brings to the fore the most combative and non-conformist side of an author who celebrates the marginal and impure as a means of defiance of the normative and constraining —a prescriptiveness which, in the context of the earlier decades of the twentieth century, is equivalent to notions of imperial supremacy, fascist dictatorship, or patriarchal tyranny. The author reflects on whether it is by means of explicit conversation or by means of powerfully meaningful silences —"the things people don't say" (*The Voyage Out*, 255-256)— that these stories rebel against imposition and repression, committed as they are to a plurality of voices, meanings, and forms.

Reynier's book succeeds in portraying that exclusive moment of interaction between reader and writer that occurs upon reading Woolf's stories. Through the book, we discover the spirit of an author that defies authority—whether patriarchal, artistic, or socio-cultural—and oversteps the boundaries of the fictional page to walk hand in hand with the reader, who is let into the very structure of the narrative, now demystified and put at their service. Yet, in this exchange between Woolf and her readers, not only is the metafictional heart of the narrative offered to them, but once those barriers have disappeared, Reynier reminds us, it is their very soul they come to share, at least as long as the “moment of ecstasy” that each narrative comprises lasts.

Notes

176

¹. The importance of this element in Woolf's fiction has also been discussed by Christopher Ames. In his analysis of novels like *The Years* or *Mrs. Dalloway* he underlines the fundamental role of these parties, insofar as they even acquire a quasi-sacred ritualistic value (Ames 1991: 11).

². Woolf uses the term “honesty” to refer to Chekhov's method of writing, insofar as he is interested in “the soul's relation to goodness” (*Essays IV*: 185).

³. For a more detailed analysis on the role of the grotesque in Woolf's fiction, see: Andrés, Isabel, *A Deformed Existence. An*

Analysis of Carnival and the Grotesque in The Years (2011); see also, by the same author: “Is It in His Feet? The Role of Cripple and Dismemberment in *Jacob's Room*” (2006); “Orlando in Wonderland: The Carnavalesque Turn in Orlando's Androgyny” (2007); Additionally, in “Virginia Woolf's Shot on the Reader: The Case of ‘Lappin and Lapinova’” (2010), I examine the value of some of the major grotesque elements that appear in that story, inasmuch as it bluntly defies patriarchal society and the enclosing conventions of Victorian marriages.

Works cited

AMES, Christopher. 1991. *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press.

ANDRÉS, Isabel. 2006. “Is It in His Feet? The Role of Cripple and Dismemberment in *Jacob's Room*”. *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 70: 26-27.

—. 2007. “Orlando in Wonderland: The Carnavalesque Turn in Orlando's Androgyny”. *In-Between: Essays & Studies in Literary Criticism* 14 (2): 213-223.

—. 2010. “Virginia Woolf's Shot on the Reader: The Case of ‘Lappin and Lapinova’”.

Reviews

- Proceedings of the XXXIII AEDEAN International Conference*. Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz.
- (1925) 1992. *Mrs. Dalloway*. In Showalter, E. (ed.) London: Penguin.
- (1941) 1992. *Between the Acts*. In Kermode, F. (ed.) Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- 2011. *A Deformed Existence. An Analysis of Carnival and the Grotesque in The Years*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press.
- 1985. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. In Dick, S. (ed.) San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. C. Emerson. Manchester: Manchester U.P.
- 1994. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf (1925-1928)*, vol. IV. In McNeillie, A. (ed.) London: Hogarth Press.
- WOOLF, Virginia. (1915) 1992. *The Voyage Out*. In Jonson, J. (ed.) Oxford, New York: Oxford U.P.

Received: 1 July 2010

