MODERN CHARACTERISTICS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS. DALLOWAY

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Abstract: *Virginia Woolf alongside James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence represents one of the modernist writers of the period 1914-1927, a period which is considered the richest in the 20th century English literature.*

The characteristics of modernism are to be found in all of Virginia Woolf's novels, but her narrative technique mostly implies elements belonging to the stream of consciousness, to the free indirect speech and to psychoanalysis.

The writer's characters suffer from spiritual loneliness, disillusionment and alienation and their physical and moral portraits are described by using the technique of the multiple narrative points of view.

The unconventional use of the figures of speech also creates the particular symbols of Virginia Woolf's novels.

Keywords**:** *modernism, narrative techniques, symbols*

The 20th century represents one of the most flourishing period in the English and European literature. Modern elements intertwine with the classical ones. The novelty of this period is to be seen not only in prose, but also in poetry and theater. The new century represents a new beginning.

Modernism as a literary movement reached its highest development in the 20th century. Modernist writers and poets based their works on such themes as: breakdown of social norms, alienation, spiritual loneliness, disillusionment, rejection of history, rejection of outdated social systems, objection to religious thoughts, substitution of mythical past, the effects that the Two World Wars had on humanity etc.

In point of the stylistic characteristics of the modernist prose and poetry, there can be mentioned the usage of: the free indirect speech, the stream of consciousness technique, the figures of speech, the satire, the irony, the symbolic representations, the psychoanalysis, the multiple narrative points of view etc., elements that are present in Virginia Woolf's novels, too.

Alongside the prose of the century, the poetry also suffered the changes imposed by the modernist period. The writers of the 20th century modernised their way of writing under the impact of the social, political and literary developments.

Virginia Woolf, David Herbert Lawrence and James Joyce are the writers who mostly experienced the new narrative techniques of modernism. The novels that Virginia Woolf wrote in the 1920s placed her among the best of the modern novelists.

Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), is written in the conventional narrative manner, which emphasizes the character- analysis, a technique that is to be found in *Night and Day* (1919) as well.

In the novel *Jacob's Room* (1922) the personality of the character is revealed by a series of unrelated impressions filtered mainly through the consciousness of people with whom he interacts. These mental processes are presented with the help of the internal monologue. The same method is again used in *Mrs. Dalloway (1925)*.

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Using this technique Virginia Woolf does not only create the lives of her characters, but also the London background using a temporal and spatial framework.

To the Lighthouse does not only show a great mastery of the stream of consciousness technique, but it is also considered her best novel.

"Virginia Woolf's best novel is perhaps *To the Lighthouse*, which appeared in 1927. It shows how, in major modernist fiction, the novel not only approaches poetry, but in a certain sense becomes it." (Rogers, 1990: 427).

Virginia Woolf is one of the most important exponents of stream-of-consciousness technique. She has a remarkable gift for rendering the nuances of thought because the writer preferred to treat the life of the mind and not necessarily that of the body.

The world of Virginia Woolf's novels is built around small moments of perception that the various characters experience. They are brought together both in space, by sharing similar experiences, and in time, through memory and conscious analysis. The result is a vision of many different lives lived simultaneously.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf tried to carry the stream of consciousness technique to its highest level of achievement by making it a completely artistic way of portraying life.

The novel has a rigorous structure. The entire action is limited to a single June day. Clarissa Dalloway is the central character, but the action is presented mainly through the minds of the other people that surround her, without any reference to time or space. The novel seems to be more concerned with the past of the characters and their consciousness than with the things that take place in that day except things such as Mrs. Dalloway's party, her shopping, the death of Septimus Warren Smith, things that do take place in the course of the day.

All the action of the novel is centered round Clarissa, but the method of presentation is different. It is not a simple description. The reader has to move through Clarissa's mind to the days of her early youth, for example, a period spent at home where she met Peter Walsh.

> But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable, and when it came to that scene in the little garden by the fountain, she had to break with him or they would have been destroyed, both of them ruined, she was convinced; though she had borne about her for years like an arrow sticking in her heart the grief, the anguish: and then the horror of the moment when someone told her at a concert that he had married a woman met on the boat going to India! Never should she forget all that. Cold, heartless, a prude, he called her. Never could she understand how he cared. (Woolf, 1994: 11)

The same investigation has to be done in the case of Peter Walsh who has come to visit Clarissa after some years.

> "And how are you?" said Peter Walsh, positively trembling; taking both her hands; kissing both her hands. She's grown older, he thought, sitting down. I shan't tell her anything about it, he thought, for she's grown older. She's looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him, thought he had kissed her hands. Putting his hand into his pocket, he took out a large pocket-knife and half opened the blade. (Woolf, 1994: 55)

The reader finds out not only about the character of Clarissa, but also about a group of people who are related to her. Each of them meets Mrs. Dalloway in the course

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of this particular day in a way or another. Either she thinks of them or they think of her or they simply meet in London.

> But Miss Kilman did not hate Mrs. Dalloway. Turning her large gooseberry- coloured eyes upon Clarissa, observing her small pink face, her delicate body, her air of freshness and fashion, Miss Kilman felt, Fool! Simpleton! You who have known neither sorrow nor pleasure; who have trifled your life away! And there rose in her an overmastering desire to overcome her; to unmask her. If she could have felled her it would have eased her. But it was not the body; it was the soul and its mockery that she wished to subdue; make feel her mastery. If only she could make her weep; could ruin her; humiliate her; bring her to her knees crying, You are right! But this was God's will, not Miss Kilman's. It was to be a religious victory. So she glared; so she glowered. (Woolf, 1994:165)

"Thus, sometimes the reader stands still in time and moves from one character to another, and at other times, the reader stands still in space, that is, in the mind of a particular character and moves backward and forward in his consciousness." (Miroiu,1983: 119)

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf escapes from the limitation of chronological order by using the interior monologue, a form of the direct style that inserts into the text the character's plan.

> Remember my party, remember my party, said Peter Walsh as he stepped down the street, speaking to himself rhythmically, in time with the flow of the sound, the direct downright sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour. (The leaden circles dissolved in the air). Oh these parties? he thought. (Woolf, 1994: 66)

It is to be mentioned the fact that unlike James Joyce, Virginia Woolf doesn't recreate the stream of consciousness of her characters in a direct manner, but in a way that is reported. The author is always present in her novels as *an impersonal narrator*, who, as a matter of fact, represents the central consciousness that keeps control of the story.

Such phrases as: *she thought*, *he thought*, *she walked on*, *thinking*, represent the narrator's own marks, a narrator who often speaks directly, but seldom in the first person.

> There was Regent's Park. Yes. As a child he had walked in Regent's Park- odd, he thought, how the thought of childhood keeps coming back to me- the result of seeing Clarissa, perhaps; for women live much more in past than we do, he thought. (Woolf, 1994: 75)

Another element that involves the author's presence is when one hears a clock striking a particular hour. This is the moment when the author is going to shift from one character to another, either in space or in time.

> The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! The old lady had put out her light! The whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! (Woolf, 1994: 244)

The use of metaphors, of different images is also a specific characteristic that belongs to Virginia Woolf's novels.

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The landscape represents the type of description that has a relative independence to the narrative and which provides a break, a slowdown of the story. What is specific to the landscape is the fact that it can be moved from one text to another or even from one author to another without changing the course of the narration.

> A puff of wind (in spite of the heat, there was quite a wind) blew a thin black veil over the sun and over the Strand. The faces faded; the omnibuses suddenly lost their glow. For although the clouds were of mountainous white so that one could fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet, with broad golden slopes, lawns of celestial pleasure gardens, on their flanks, and had all the appearance of settled habitations assembled for the conference of gods above the world, there was a perpetual movement among them. Signs were interchanged, when, as if to fulfill some scheme arranged already, now a summit dwindled, now a whole block of pyramidal size which had kept its station inalterably advanced into the midst or gravely led the procession to fresh anchorage. Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow- white or gold- kindled surface. (Woolf, 1994: 182- 183)

The unconventional use of the figures of speech creates particular symbols. Some of the most important symbols that appear in Virginia Woolf's novels are represented by the tree and the flower images. The variety of colors and the beauty of flowers suggest emotions and feelings that make the difference between characters. They mark Clarissa's and Septimus' souls.

Another important symbol in *Mrs. Dalloway* is represented by waves and water which almost always suggest the possibility of extinction or death. The narrative structure of the novel itself also suggests fluidity. One character's thoughts appear, intensify and then fade into another's, much like waves. Such an example of communion between the human soul and nature is to be found in the following excerpt.

> Going and coming, beckoning, signaling, so the light and shadow, which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now made the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting- room; watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper. Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room, and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more. (Woolf, 1994: 183- 184)

Virginia Woolf has often been considered a novelist of sensibility, that is, she had a poet's temperament. The use of metaphor, the harmony of language, the delight in style are elements which more often characterize lyric poets than novelists.

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