

POST-IMPRESSIONISM AND VIRGINIA WOOLF'S EXPERIMENTATION WITH LITERARY FORMS

POST-EMPRESYONİZM VE VIRGINIA WOOLF'UN EDEBÎ BİÇİM DENEYSELÇİLİĞİ

Nurten BAYRAKTAR¹

Abstract

Virginia Woolf as one of the leading figures of modernist literature was in pursuit of challenging the so-called limitations of form in fiction. Triggered by the intellectual discussions in the Bloomsbury Group, formed by a group of intellectuals and artists in England, she attempted to redefine literary form by reorganizing her fiction to oppose the painters in the group who believed that literary form is restricted because of the nature of language. Influenced by her discussions with post-impressionist artists such as Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell and Roger Fry, Woolf acknowledged that artistic creativity is intermingled by "a myriad impressions" of an "ordinary mind on an ordinary day" with its own peculiarities and dissonances. Similarly, post-impressionism rejects objectivity as a necessity in realist painting and embraces spiritualism and personality in artistic expression. Knowing that literature is not solely composed of abstract ideas, Woolf even tested new printing techniques. In her novels, not only content and narrative techniques but also the norms regarding physical organization of a book are challenged. Therefore, Woolf greyed the lines between form and content by rendering the book itself as a fragmented material. Consequently, this paper aims to discuss Woolf's experimentalism in her selected works as a modernist attempt to blur the borders of the two edging literary components—form and content—by looking into the influences of post-impressionist art on her fiction.

Keywords: Modernism, Post-impressionism, Virginia Woolf, Literary Experimentalism, Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell

Öz

Modernist edebiyatın öncülerinden olan Virginia Woolf kurmaca metnin sözde kısıtlamalarına meydan okumayı amaçlamıştır. İngiltere'de bir grup entelektüel ve sanatçının kurduğu Bloomsbury Grup dâhilindeki entelektüel tartışmaların tetiklemeyle, dilin doğası nedeniyle edebî biçimin sınırlı olduğuna inanan grubun ressam üyelerine karşı çıkmayı amaç edinmiş, kendi kurmaca eserlerini yeniden düzenlemiş ve edebî biçimi yeniden tanımlamaya çalışmıştır. Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell ve Roger Fry gibi post-empresyonist ressamlar ile tartışmalarından etkilenen Woolf sanatsal üretimin "sıradan bir günde" "sıradan bir zihnin" tüm tuhafılığı ve uyumsuzluğuyla edindiği "sayısız izlenimi"yle iç içe geçmiş olduğunu öne sürmüştür. Benzer bir şekilde, post-empresyonizm realist resimde nesnellüğün bir gereklilik olduğunu reddedip sanatsal üretimde kişilik ve spiritüelliği benimsemiştir. Edebiyatın yalnızca soyut fikirlerden ibaret olmadığını bilen Woolf, yeni baskı tekniklerini dahi denemiştir. Romanlarında yalnızca içerik ve anlatı teknikleri değil, aynı zamanda bir kitabın fiziksel düzenine dair normlara da meydan okumuştur. Böylelikle, kitabın kendisini parçalandırarak içerik ile biçim arasındaki sınırları soluklaştırmıştır. Sonuç olarak, bu makalenin amacı Woolf'un edebî unsurların iki uç noktası olan biçim ve içerik arasındaki sınırları belirsizleştirmeye dayalı deneyselçiliğini, post-empresyonist sanatın Woolf'un kurmaca edebiyatına etkilerini seçilmiş eserlerinde inceleyerek, modernist bir deneme olarak tartışmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Modernizm, Post-empresyonizm, Virginia Woolf, Edebî Deneyselcilik, Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell

¹ Res. Assist., Cappadocia University, Department of English Language and Literature, nurtenbayraktar12@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-3786-6698

In rejection of traditional literary formulas, modernist writers developed new techniques for the new age while modernism emerged as a protest against the sense of detachment, dissolution of the self, and the atmosphere of bewilderment that marked the early twentieth century. Considering the modern disconcert, modernist aspiration blurred the set principles of literary tradition by reforming the genres. The characteristic tendency in modernist literature was based on experimenting narrative sequence which shifts in time while action, suspense and resolved ending were omitted (Armstrong 19). Virginia Woolf, too, played with the generic aspects of the novel to challenge the limits of conventional fiction. She reformulated time and space to expand the limits of setting while lessening the dialogues yet adding the flowing of inner thoughts in her characters' minds. Although she especially focused on formal innovations, form and content are inseparable elements of fiction in her endeavor to grasp life as it is (*Essays* 3 160). Influenced by the ongoing literary experimentation and the artistic revolutions in the early twentieth century, particularly post-impressionism, Woolf challenged the borders between form and content by reorienting the characteristics of fiction.

As a keen follower of world literatures and artistic movements, Virginia Woolf highlighted the inevitable change in literature by arguing that literature follows life and social dynamics through observing human nature. Even though she did not directly engage with the politics, she pointed out that literature had to react the dissolution of society as she claimed that "grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated" (*Essays* 3 433-34). Believing that a new age and a new concept of society and individual had started, she called for innovation in literary production by celebrating her contemporary modernist novelists. What she suggested was neither a new tendency in narration nor a new formalist endeavor, but both at the same time—experimenting with form and content by expanding the sources literary creativity can draw from as she offered in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919, 1925) "nothing—no 'method', no experiment, even of the wildest is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. The proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss" (*Essays* 3 163-64). While criticizing the late Victorian novelists, "the Edwardians" in her words, she praised the newly emerged authors, "the Georgians," for their courage to subvert the set principles of novel genre. Almost all the modernist novelists she admired had a special interest and ambition to test literary forms. What Woolf and other authors attempted was an ongoing experience of reacting the older establishments at a time when they did not clearly see to what extent literature could be experimented.

The turbulence which followed World War I, the political polarization and economic depression affected artists and critics who purposefully resisted traditions by asserting that the world would no longer be as it had been. Virginia Woolf assured in her essay "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" (1924) that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (*Captain's* 96). Woolf's referring to a vague date "in or about December 1910" is naively accepted as a hitherto of the political dynamics of the period such as the general election, or the suffragette movement. Nevertheless, as she embraced an ironic even sarcastic attitude towards politics, critics agree on that she highlighted the opening of the "Manet and the Post Impressionists" exhibition in London where the French paintings were introduced to the British audience by Roger Fry (Hodgkinson). In the exhibition, Fry introduced the work of Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, Georges Seurat, and Paul Cézanne who he admired for their rejection of impressionist art which was devoted to naturalism with the aim of reaching emotions. Fry hoped that the exhibition could innovate British art even though it was not received as he expected. Fry was heavily criticized, even humiliated for this "rubbish" by the critic Charles Ricketts (qtd. in Hodgkinson). The British Library defines the impacts of the exhibition as "culture quake" (Hodgkinson). Considering the outrage caused by the exhibition, Jonathan R. Quick justifiably warns that Woolf as an essayist was ironic and hyperbolic and might be mocking the impacts of exhibition by saying that human character changed in or about December 1910 (547). Indeed, the exhibition immediately raised the tension, but then was forgotten soon after the second exhibition in 1920. Although these painters are the most influential figures in art history today, at that time they were seen as a loose group of anarchists who attached the artistic value to form rather than content. In a similar attitude on a different art form, Woolf was keen on form and, like these painters, her fiction was criticized for its insufficient content. Particularly Arnold Bennet, who was an influential late Victorian novelist and critic, claimed that her characters "cannot survive in mind" (*Diary* 2 248). Even though the exhibition was not favored by the general public and the critics of the period, it was a landmark for the Bloomsbury Group. Woolf's enthusiasm for formal innovations was largely triggered by the intellectual discussions among the group whose members were ranging from authors, painters, editors and political writers. As an artistic group from different fields, they traveled, painted, modelled for each other's painting, criticized one another's work, and edited one another's writing. Woolf was an enthusiastic participant in these "élite practices" (Lee 33), especially discussing art and literature in the context of the twentieth century with post-impressionist artists of the group Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, and Roger Fry.

Woolf furthered her discussions with these painters in her well-known essay “Modern Fiction” which was published in 1921. She claimed that literature must narrate the “life itself” which is a whole: “Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (160). What Woolf suggested is that writer is inseparable from the outer world, which means writing is a kind of “absorb[ation] [of] mental impressions from the data of the outside world” (Goldman 104). Furthermore, Woolf claimed that this occurs in the mind without a pause as it is “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (160). Coined as stream-of-consciousness technique, matter as it appears is not fundamental in literature, but the subjective impressions initiated by the material data are significant for Woolf. The outer world is re-configured by the author’s inner world, which forms up the experience of writing; and this is how exactly life is experienced for Woolf. Since life is made of everlasting impressions, Woolf encouraged the literary use of them:

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 or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than is commonly thought small. (161)

As observed in the quotation, Woolf highlighted that any impression, any experience or any event can be source for fiction no matter how it is disoriented. Acknowledging that life does not have a perfect shape, she believed that literature has no controlling boundaries. She also opened room in literature for unimportant details in life. Roger Fry suggested a similar claim about artist’s aspiring from anything while converting impressions to a harmonized unity:

Art is an expression and stimulus to the imaginative life rather than a copy of actual life. Art appreciates emotion in and for itself. The artist, is the most constantly observant of his surroundings and the least affected by their intrinsic aesthetic value. As he contemplates a particular field of vision the aesthetically chaotic and accidental conjunction of forms and colours begin to crystallize into a harmony. (“Æsthetics” 14)

Fry particularized the imaginative power of art as the method of interpreting actuality. As he acknowledged the chaotic nature of life embedded in art, he posed artistic production as the capability of harmonizing it. Woolf liberated literature by stating that no method can

be disallowed. Similarly, Roger Fry claimed that everything is possible for art by stating that “[i]n Art we know nothing for certain” (qtd. in Bell 5). Woolf pinpointed author’s role to see around and create meanings out of impressions to narrate life as “a sense of discrimination between the given of experience (reality in inverted commas) and that which has to be sought after (the artistic representation of another kind of reality)” (Gualtieri 2). Respectively, Fry put forth:

It was inevitable that artists should turn around and question the validity of the fundamental assumption that art aimed at representation; and the moment the question was fairly posed it became clear the pseudo scientific assumption that fidelity to appearance was the measure of art had no logical foundation. (“Art and Life” 7)

“Disconnected” and “incoherent” forms of life, in Woolf’s words, are welcomed by Fry for that art does not necessarily reflect what life is. On the contrary, art reflects what life might be. Woolf and Fry suggested that life is the source of art and they rejected the idea that artist should comply with certain aesthetic norms. An artist can be inspired by any minute moment in life or an image of a singular object by trusting on subjective perception. Artist impersonalizes any personal impression while transferring observation to work.

Agreed on the indeterminate nature of art, Woolf immediately began to test the so-called limits of writing. *Jacob’s Room* (1922) is one of the influential novels by Woolf about which she stated that it presents her own voice. The novel is employed with some innovative techniques as a *Bildungsroman* with its “tightly constructed, self-reflexive narrative” (Goldman 50). The protagonist Jacob’s absence is more significant than his presence as he is not directly presented by the narrator but represented by other characters. As Goldman suggests, Jacob’s ‘room’ is a matter of “the social and political space” of a man: “Occasionally the free-indirect narrative (a modernist technique that moves between third- and first-person narrative, stretching third-person voice to encompass first-person experience and voice) enters Jacob’s thoughts, but mostly he is apprehended through narrative that explores the consciousness of others as they encounter him” (50). Through Jacob’s absent presence, Woolf challenged the conventional plot structure of *Bildungsroman* by employing the indirect representation of the main character, which subverts the expected maturation process of the protagonist. The essence of the novel of formation, that is the protagonist, is lacking while the only given descriptions are pieces of impressions about him. As post-impressionism departed the

crucial aim of perfectly realist representation in impressionist art, Woolf abandoned the fundamental feature of *Bildungsroman* by excluding the protagonist. The novel does not narrate who Jacob is but presents who Jacob might be. She provided a notion of literary realism which is bound to other characters' perception, which demonstrated that form and realism in art are indeterminate and intrinsically open to be challenged.

Post-impressionist artists Roger Fry and Vanessa Bell's failure in establishing a relation between form and literature urged Woolf to carry out more courageous formalistic experimentation in her later works. Fry claimed in his work *The Artist and Psychoanalysis* (1924) that the English society cannot separate form from content. His suggestions attracted Woolf to question the role of form in fiction as she stated in her letter to Fry: "I've been [...] trying to make out what I mean by form in fiction. I say it is emotion put into the right relations; and has nothing to do with form as used of painting" (*Letters* 3 132). As it is seen in her later essays and letters on this issue, Woolf disdained dull symbolism like the idealized English gardens in the paintings, which does not raise any question about the aesthetic quality of artistic expression. The discussions on the basic elements of art between the two were influential on Woolf in different aspects. She wrote in her diary: "Roger asked me if I founded my writing upon texture or upon structure; I connected structure with plot & therefore said "texture" (*Diary* 1 80). Julia Briggs clarifies Woolf's reply as follows:

Connecting structure with plot, and plot with the unacceptable and unspoken term 'narrative', may have encouraged Woolf to choose 'texture', but from a formalist point of view 'structure' could have been the 'right' answer (if there was indeed a right answer). At any rate, it was the structural aspect of form to which she now turned her attention. (100)

Woolf's uncertainty about what form is demonstrates that her experimenting was an ongoing process under construction and re-construction. As suggested by Julia Briggs, Woolf was highly concerned with form in addition to her inquiries upon the value of literature to contradict Fry's underestimation of literary form. The idea shared by Roger Fry and Vanessa Bell that "[n]arrative was dubious as a source of aesthetic value because, like narrative painting, it was too often guilty of 'suggesting emotion and conveying ideas'" (qtd. in Briggs 97), was surely not an acceptable comment on literature for Woolf. As she was introduced with the theorization of modernism by the painters Clive Bell and Roger Fry, Woolf questioned the difference between plastic arts and literature. She tried to

understand whether literature is “suggestive” and “associative” because it is bound to language (Briggs 100). With an aim of proving that language does not limit literary form, she wanted to explore the intrinsic formulations of form in literary works. Thus, her works written after 1917 were provided with “a visual or spatial, even a ‘plastic’ dimension” (Briggs 100). She did not only expand the subject matters of her novels but also benefitted from unconventional narrative techniques to play with the boundaries of narrative time and space.

While expanding her discussions on literature and art with her friends in the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf also discovered that writing is not limited to an author’s submission of the manuscript. She discovered that textuality of literature can provide new horizons for an experimentalist whose narrative techniques can be combined with printing techniques. On the way to her groundbreaking novels such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), her short story “Kew Gardens” (1919) was her first formalist attempt to test the relation between writing and printing. The story comprises of parallel minor events happening in the garden, including not only humans but also the fauna and the flora. While the insects and snails are moving on the flowerbed, four dialogues continue separately. What is surprising is Woolf’s deliberate use of pages for the story. The Woolfs had a new printing machine worked with the folio through which “books were made up from single sheets of paper folded down the middle to form four pages” (Briggs 101). Therefore, the pages were multiples of four. Specially prepared for the printing machine, “Kew Gardens” consisted of sixteen pages on which the four dialogues in the story were put in those specific pages to match the couples according to their personalities exposed in their communications with their partners. Through the folio, it is possible to establish a bridge of their concerns and subject matters of their dialogue as well.² For example, “the first and fourth couples being mixed (and so corresponding to pages 1 and 4, the outer forme of the sheet), while the same-sex conversations correspond to pages 2 and 3 (the inner forme)” (Briggs 102). Furthermore, not only the dialogues but also the slow movements of the animals around the human are possible to establish a connection with the pages they were printed on. In this way, “Kew Gardens” was endorsed not only with oppositions between the characters and other constituents in the narrative, but also formed a form-wise contradiction. While rewriting her story to adapt folio pages, Woolf

² Julia Briggs offers a detailed explanation of Woolf’s method used in the publication of “Kew Gardens” in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (2006).

succeeded in demonstrating that literature is also 'plastic' while form-content and page-content can support one another.

Diminishing the limits of literary writing started by "Kew Gardens" turned into a tool for Woolf's feminist messages layered in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Form-content-page harmony is recognizable in this evocative feminist novel in which Woolf analogies women with odd numbers and men with prime numbers to reject the supposition that women have dual personality. She invented a kind of numerical system in page organization to challenge not only misogynistic views but also the traditional form (Briggs 105). She used the textual nature of a book based on separations of the text through page numbers for a surprising subversion of the connotative meanings of numbers. She obliterated presumptions on female personality by putting the descriptions of female characters on the pages with odd numbers. She organized and reorganized pages as if a painter was repainting a canvas with different colors. In order to offer a consistent picture where all different colors are harmonized, she maintained the feminist implications of the novel while re-shaping textuality to accompany content.

Following her initiative experimentation of earlier work, *The Waves*, acknowledged as a work of high modernism, is her masterpiece which offers a vibrant unity of form and content with its multiple identities and segmented subjectivities compatible with fragmentary narrative. Woolf admitted that she first aimed to imply the six characters as a single unity, then she herself experienced how hard it was to make even oneself one (*Letters* 6 397). Thus, the soliloquys and interludes notify "a sense of contested, incomplete or multiple subjectivity" (Goldman 71). As a result, the characters are captivated in their existential crisis. Therefore, the unsynchronized content (identity) in the novel is interwoven with the form through the disjointed soliloquys and interludes. Furthermore, in the process of moving on from manuscript to typescript, Woolf rewrote the novel to make "the nine unnumbered chapters (separated by ten italicised interludes) themselves create the shape of a pyramid, or rather of the wave whose rhythm and sound permeate the novel" as Julia Briggs explains what she did in reorganizing her work: Chapters 1 and 8 respond each other by focusing on loneliness and togetherness, chapters 2 and 7 focus on time, chapters 3 and 6 concentrate on language, chapters 4 and 5 present "the summit of the wave at noon, followed by its relapse" (109). All come together to create an image of wave. Chapter 9, on the other hand, stays out of the wavy shape as Bernard's final soliloquy being the summarizing and also critical point of view (Briggs 109).

At this point, what Woolf said is clearly demonstrated: "I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot" (*Letters* 4 204). The rhythm of the sea is forged with the content of each chapter. Woolf tested Roger Fry's prejudice against formalist depth of literature as she enriched her work with a unique plot structure in this novel. Woolf's final reworking of *The Waves* reflects her recreation of Fry's "volume and mass, depth and recession – into a structure that, though built out of words, nevertheless made a shape and possessed a visual, perhaps even a spatial dimension" (Briggs 110). The pace of the novel sustained through the integrity of content creates an image of wave which is unstill and even more vigorous than a still representation of wave on a canvass. Woolf did not only prove that fiction has flexibility of forms but also manifested the vibrancy of impressionist writing.

Virginia Woolf conducted new methods which innovated content and form in fiction to acknowledge the aesthetic trials and inventive styles of her period. Even though she simplified the content of her novels, she sophisticated form to refute Roger Fry and Vanessa Bell's claim that narrative is innately limited in terms of form. Following her early writing which obscures the characteristics of novel genre, she formulated unique structures in her later works by blurring the conventional definitive features of fiction. She provided dynamism in literary forms by knitting her narratives meticulously while preserving the simplicity of plotline. As illustrated in this essay, she applied literary experimentation in a wide range of content, form, textuality and physicality of literature. She did not simply disorient the elements of fiction but reoriented them to have a solid and original physical dimension in literature.

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Julie. *Experimental Fiction*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Bell, Quentin. *Roger Fry: An Inaugural Lecture*. Leeds: Leeds University Press, 1964.
- Briggs, Julia. *Reading Virginia Woolf*. Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
- Fry, Roger. "Art and Life." *Vision and Design*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1920. *Project Gutenberg*. 12 February 2017. Web. 1 February 2022: 1-11.
- . "An Essay In Aesthetics." *Vision and Design*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1920. *Project Gutenberg*. 12 February 2017. Web. 1 February 2022: 11-26.
- Goldman, Jane. *The Cambridge Introduction to Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Gualtieri, Elena. *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past*. London: Macmillan, 2000.

- Hodgkinson, Will. "Culture quake: the Post Impressionist exhibition, 1910." *The British Library*. 25 May 2016. Web. 12 January 2022.
- Lee, Hermoine. *Virginia Woolf*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1997.
- Quick, Jonathan R. "Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry and Post-Impressionism." *The Massachusetts Review* 26.4 (1985): 547-70. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 January 2022.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950.
- . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. 5 vols. 1915-1941. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1975.
- . *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Eds. Nigel Nicolson, and Joanna Trautmann. 6 vols. 1888-1941. New York: Harcourt, 1976.
- . *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. 4 vols. London: Hogarth, 1986.