

MATERIALITY OF MODERNISM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ESSAYS

VIRGINIA WOOLF'UN DENEMELERİNDE MODERNİZMİN MADDESELLİĞİ

Nurten BAYRAKTAR¹

Abstract

It is acknowledged that Virginia Woolf's influential modernist novels primarily focus on self and spirituality. Although her emphasis on the materiality of life and literature, which is closely intertwined with spirituality, was a fundamental aspect of Virginia Woolf's works, it was partially overlooked by critics. However, recent studies on the subject of materiality in literature have provided new insights into how objects are portrayed in Woolf's fiction, which suggests that Woolf's emphasis on the material world deserves more consideration. This paper asserts that Virginia Woolf's emphasis on the material world as an integral aspect of life and literature is evident in several of her essays, particularly in "Modern Fiction" (1921), "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown" (1924) "Robinson Crusoe" (1925) and "The New Biography" (1927). By examining Woolf's defense of the Georgian writers' techniques, which focus on the portrayal of human life connected with materiality, as opposed to the Edwardians' emphasis on social and material details as bare facts with no connection to spirituality, this research highlights the significance of materiality in literature for Woolf.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Modernism, Materiality, Modernist Criticism, Virginia Woolf's Essays

Öz

Virginia Woolf'un öne çıkan modernist romanlarının öncelikle benlik ve maneviyata odaklandığı kabul edilir. Maneviyatla iç içe olan hayatın ve edebiyatın maddeselliğine yaptığı vurgu, Woolf'un çalışmalarının temel bir yönü olsa da eleştirmenler tarafından kısmen göz ardı edildi. Bununla birlikte, edebiyatta maddesellik konusu üzerine yapılan son araştırmalar, Woolf'un kurmaca eserlerinde nesnelere nasıl tasvir edildiğine dair yeni bakış açıları sağladı ve Woolf'un maddesel dünyaya yaptığı vurgunun daha fazla dikkate alınması gerektiğini gösterdi. Bu makale, Virginia Woolf'un yaşamın ve edebiyatın ayrılmaz bir yönü olarak maddesel dünyaya yaptığı vurgunun başta "Modern Fiction" (1921), "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown" (1924) "Robinson Crusoe" (1925) ve "The New Biography" (1927) başlıklı yazılarında olmak üzere birçok denemesinde açıkça görüldüğünü ileri sürer. İnsan yaşamının maddesellik ile bağlantılı olarak resmedilmesine odaklanan George dönemi yazarlarının tekniklerini savunan Woolf'un, Edward dönemi yazarlarının toplumsal ve maddesel ayrıntıları maneviyat ile hiçbir bağlantısı olmayan salt gerçekler olarak sunduğu iddiasını inceleyerek Woolf'un edebiyatta maddeselliğe verdiği önemi vurgular.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Virginia Woolf, Modernizm, Maddesellik, Modernist Edebi Eleştiri, Virginia Woolf'un Denemeleri

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

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a leading figure in modernist English literature, and she was known for both use of newly emerged narrative techniques and her influence on literary criticism during the early twentieth century. Her essays, vitalized by her insightful literary criticism, not only function as a source of inspiration for modernist fiction, but also present significant contributions to feminist criticism. In her critique of late Victorian literary traditions, Woolf broadens the scope of sources that literary creativity can draw upon by liberating the very materials which can comprise literature in her famous essay "Modern Fiction" published in 1921 (110). Woolf's fiction and critical essays demonstrate that literature must encompass both spirituality and materiality to fully capture human experience and infuse it with meaning. As she often incorporates moments from ordinary daily life into her narratives, exploring her characters' connections with the nonhuman world can reveal previously undiscovered aspects of her fiction. Therefore, by exploring the role of materiality in Woolf's criticism, this essay aims to contribute to the contemporary studies on Woolf which enrich or even liberate traditional critical studies on modernist literature.

Although investigating Woolf's modernism from a material-based perspective may seem like a fallacy or a paradox, Woolf suggests that everything can be material for literature and, therefore, every *thing* can be *material* for literary analysis. Thus, it is surely possible to turn our attention to the new paths of thinking in literary studies. Karen Barad, a prominent contemporary philosopher in the posthuman studies, identifies the tendency to overlook the significance of matter in critical discourse by stating that we focus on language, discourse and, culture whereas "[t]here is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter" (801). We fail to contact with matter for the sake of its own materiality while dealing only with its representations. Considering Woolf's view of literature as a mingle of spirituality and materiality, we must perceive objects in her works as active and vital material entities, rather than merely assigning them symbolic or transcendental meanings.

Virginia Woolf had a particular admiration for the use of objects in literature during the eighteenth century even though we tend to focus on the nineteenth and the twentieth-century materialism connected with mass production and consumerist culture. Woolf compliments Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as "large earthenware pot:" "By believing fixedly in the solidity of the pot and its earthiness, [Defoe] has subdued every other element to his design; he has roped the universe into a harmony" ("Crusoe" 75). Suggesting that Defoe employs solid objects as a foundation for Crusoe's survival tale, she

claims that the physical world is vividly depicted through the use of formal realism in eighteenth-century fiction. She acknowledges formal realism's "interrupt[ing] romantic fantasy with novelistic fact" because relying solely on sentimentalism is insufficient in novel writing (Brown 15). Woolf's admiration of Defoe's skill in blending solidity and fictitiousness asserts that the objects in Woolf's work are not simply there to provide accurate descriptions of the world, but instead are used in a more complex way to help create a fictional world that blends reality and imagination.

Woolf's focus on incorporating the material world as a part of human experience in her fiction is a consequence of her desire to protest the conventional approaches to novel writing. In "Modern Fiction," she labels some of the late Victorian novelists "materialist" as opposed to the "spiritualist" modernist authors, Woolf explains the problems of the conventional late Victorian novel in contrast to newly emerged techniques. As the term "modernism" was not fixed yet, Woolf groups the authors as "the Edwardians" and "the Georgians." Tagged as "materialists," the Edwardian novelists such as Arnold Bennet, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells are contrasted with "spiritual" Georgian authors, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, James Joyce, Lytton Strachey, and T. S. Eliot. Woolf claims that Bennet was one of the most prolific novelists in 1910, yet he failed to reform his fiction with the contemporary age. What Woolf denounces is that the novelists like Bennet extensively focus on plot and characterization, which makes their novels inadequate to grasp a holistic portrayal of life. She asks the authors to "[e]xamine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" because "[t]he mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel" ("Modern Fiction" 106). Woolf's description of life as an interaction between the mind and the material world, which she characterizes as "the sharpness of steel," explains why the Edwardian novelists fail in their writing. By omitting seemingly insignificant events and circumstances, including their interaction with the material world, these novelists fail to capture an essential aspect of human perception. She asserts that even though authors are constantly influenced by the world around them, the Edwardians cannot fully depict a satisfying life in their fiction despite that the mind is continuously bombarded with countless impressions which are "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" ("Modern Fiction" 106). The outer world is to be blended with the inner world of the writer, which forms up sensuous experience, and this is what exactly life is for Woolf. Woolf advocates for the literary use of perpetual impressions that make up life:

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. (107)

In the given quote, Woolf suggests that any impression, experience, or event can serve as the foundation for fiction, even if it may seem chaotic or disconnected. In other words, writers can draw inspiration from any aspect of life, regardless of how seemingly insignificant or unorganized it may be. This implies that the creative process is not limited to any specific set of circumstances, and that writers have the ability to transform even the most mundane of experiences into compelling works of fiction. Hence, she praises the “spiritual” novelists who abandon traditional plot structures and free the mind to engage with the physical world in new and unexpected ways. Although Woolf refers to the Edwardians as “materialist,” she does not disregard the use of matter as a source of inspiration for literary production. What she does criticize, however, is their excessive focus on plot development and superficial character descriptions in their novels. In other words, Woolf is not against using material things as a basis for literary works, but rather against the narrow and shallow approach that some writers took in their works. As highlighted in the passage above, she values the importance of “atoms” (matter in general term) and, more importantly, their relationship with the mind in literature. She discourages the use of matter as mere factual details in fiction but recognizes its significance when skillfully combined with human perception and intuition. In simpler terms, she contends that both objects and subjects are essential for creating a compelling portrayal of life in fiction.

As a critic, Woolf disapproves of the fixation on social or material details that overlooks the spiritual and psychological dimensions of characters. Nevertheless, this does not imply a complete disregard for materiality in literature as Liesl M. Olson explains:

While Woolf sought to remove the heavy furniture of the realist and naturalist novel in order to render the inner workings of the mind—the “atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall”—she knew that the modern novel could not flee from world of everyday things, from “the common objects of daily prose [···]. (“Cotton” 43)

Woolf, as a modernist, did not intend to prioritize spirituality in a way that diminishes the significance of materiality. For this reason, Mrs. Ramsay is introduced as she is “cutting out *pictures* from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy stores,” Orlando “slice[s] the air with his *blade*,” and Mrs. Dalloway says, “she would buy the *flowers* herself” (*Lighthouse* 9; *Orlando* 1; *Mrs. Dalloway* 1; emphasis added). Suggesting

that Woolf disregards or undervalues materiality would be unjustified because her work is not divided by “inner versus outer” or “personal versus political” (Olson, “Cotton” 46). Woolf does not create a rigid separation between different aspects of life, but rather weaves them together in a way that reflects the complexity and interconnectedness of human experience. Parallel to this, critics of Woolf’s works should avoid rigid categorizations but blend different elements together to understand how Woolf can create a more nuanced and layered depiction of life that resonates with readers on a deeper level. Her approach to spirituality and materiality should be regarded with the same attitude because “her representation of ordinary experience works to reconcile two sides of a dichotomy” (Olson, “Cotton” 46). The tension between two opposing forces or ideas, which are often seen as irreconcilable, is not explicitly stated in her fiction as her representation of ordinary experiences successfully bridges the opposing elements and presents them as complementary. Therefore, it would be unfair to view Woolf’s works through a dichotomy of spirituality versus materiality, as is evident from the following passage:

Despite her distaste for Edwardian materialism, [...], Woolf does not actually reject the representation of what she calls “the fabric of things.” She transforms, but does not reject, materialist or realist techniques. Her most successful works render ordinary experience, and do in fact depend on facts and fabric. (Olson, *Modernism* 48)

Woolf criticizes the use of objects as so-called “reality effects”² “to guarantee verisimilitude” by the Edwardian authors whereas objects in Woolf’s fiction are often metonymic to present “wider discursive networks, social processes and change.” Thus, the objects are not subordinate to the mind as she questions the supremacy of the mental world over the material world in “the idealistic regime of verisimilitude” (Morris 15). Woolf’s approach to materiality challenges the idea that the material world is less important than the spiritual, which is a common assumption in literary idealism in the late Victorian era. By valuing the significance of material objects in her works, Woolf is able to create a more detailed and holistic portrayal of the world, which is not limited to a narrow ideal of verisimilitude as in the form of illusion of reality.

As suggested, in any case, stating that all objects in a narrative are equivalent to reality effect, allegory, symbol, or imagery would render literary criticism unproductive. For this reason, we should take the material world as active, transformative and agent to offer

² Pam Morris refers to Roland Barthes’ perspective on the role of the material world in fiction. According to Barthes, objects and other details that do not impact the plot contribute to the creation of a plausible and comprehensible ambiance.

creative analyses of such canonical works. With this aim, Elaine Freedgood inquires “fugitive meaning” of objects in the Victorian novel and identifies the problem of traditional criticism: “The object as reality effect loses its potential as a material thing outside the conventions of representation; the object as metaphor loses most of its qualities in its symbolic servitude” (10). By relying on objects as mere representations or symbols of reality, the Edwardian authors oversimplify the complexity of the world and limit the scope of fiction. As a result, Woolf’s objects, which go beyond being mere “facts” or “symbols,” require a distinct perspective to generate fresh insights into modernist literature.

Many contemporary literary theorists and critics adopt a perspective that acknowledges the significance of materiality in modernist literature. The conventional approaches to modernism, which situate literary works within their contemporary philosophical and intellectual contexts, are “sensitive to the risks of decontextualisation,” so it is necessary to “theorise modernism anew [...] in our own contemporary moment” “to modernise theory” (Ryan 6). Although such studies are quite useful in understanding the historical and cultural context of works, they may decontextualize the works from their present-day relevance. By offering a more dynamic and flexible theoretical framework focused on objects, animals, and sex in Woolf’s works, Derek Ryan illustrates how we can fully understand and appreciate modernist literature in our own time. Rather than simply relying on established critical paradigms, looking into matter in Woolf’s writings is worth scholars’ attention as she already “theorises materiality throughout her work, rather than focusing only on how she alludes to, or comments on the material context in which she lived, demonstrates that the material world is not purely a concern for archivists or historicists” (Ryan 4). Indeed, Woolf’s concept of “granite and rainbow” has gained significant influence in biography writing. Granite simply refers to “facts,” whereas rainbow is “personality,” and both are meant to be integrated in a biography (“New Biography” 232). Not only the Edwardian novelists who fail to integrate spirituality and materiality in their use of matter as bare facts, Woolf denounces traditional biography writing, for it fails in integrating solidity or facts (granite) and personality or subjectivity (rainbow). Woolf criticizes not only the Edwardian novelists for their failure to blend spirituality and materiality in fiction, but also traditional biographical writing, which she denounces for its inability to effectively incorporate both factual detail and subjective experience. For Woolf, materiality and spirituality are inherently intertwined in human experience, and this fusion should be reflected not only in works of fiction but also in life writing. In other words, she suggests that writing about real-life experiences should not only focus on the material

facts but also consider the spiritual or subjective aspects of those experiences, acknowledging their interdependence.

Woolf compares the two groups of authors in their presentation of “human nature” in her essay “Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown” (1924) by exemplifying their attention to details. The essay, written as a response to Arnold Bennet’s criticism of characterization in Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), employs a fictional character called Mrs. Brown. As Bennet suggests that Woolf’s characters cannot “survive in the mind,” Woolf acknowledges that her characters are not similar to Bennet’s: “It is true that I don’t have that ‘reality’ gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness. But to go further, have I the power of conveying the true reality?” (*Diary 2* 248). Subverting the “cheapness” or the simplicity of realist fiction is an artistic preference of literary production for Woolf because she sees writing 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). Woolf places higher value on the latter approach while viewing the former as “cheap” as she experiments the techniques from both groups by imitating the portrayal of an ordinary elderly woman. Woolf warns that this should not be interpreted as a failure of either because it is a matter of style. She asserts that both literary traditions may use the same material differing only in the narrative style. For this reason, she puts that what differs is “a set of literary conventions” or “tools” which can be renamed as literary style (“Modern Fiction” 110). Therefore, her categorization as “materialist” Edwardians and “spiritualist” Georgians does not mean that either’s fiction is less equipped with materiality or spirituality.

Woolf states that the Edwardian writers focus on creating contrasting personas through “attention to the odd and the particular” (Simoniti 65) as she offers that the Edwardians “would make the old lady into a ‘character;’ he would bring out her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts; her personality would dominate the book” (“Mrs. Brown” 325). This results in an abundance of realistically detailed descriptions: “Begin by stating that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878” (332). What is missing in all these details is Mrs. Brown herself. As Vid Simoniti explains, “[t]he Edwardian style is highly descriptive and focuses on social facts, fixed psychological characteristics and material circumstances” (65). Woolf values characterizations that are connected to the social and material contexts in which they exist and believes that it is important for writers to explore the psychology and personality of their characters within their environments.

Thus, she criticizes the Edwardians' extremities in detailing a social representation while lacking the substantiality of the physical world. Woolf's criticism of the Edwardians is not about the use of "material" in writing, but rather about their use of it as "fact," resulting in uninteresting and commonplace artistic narration.

Woolf writes that she attempts to offer life as it is in *The Waves* (1931), which is mostly acknowledged as her high modernist and the most challenging work. As she suggests, the novel is "prose yet poetry; a novel & a play" (*Diary* 3 128) and "it comprises nine italicised pastoral interludes, describing the diurnal progress of the sun across a seascape and landscape, interwoven with nine multivocal sections of interrelated soliloquies by [the six characters], from childhood to maturity" (Goldman 69). Along with the interludes, Woolf states that she seeks "writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot" (*Diary* 3 316). Therefore, the plot is structured through the extermination of time as the future springs up from the past and with "now & then haunted" (*Diary* 3 118) because she "used & tossed aside all the images & symbols" (*Diary* 4 10-11). Innovatively, Woolf's tossing images makes materiality suggestive and variable as she criticizes the use of images in literature without a clear purpose or effect. She uses objects for formal experimentation as she wrote in her diary that she aims to "saturate every atom," and she continues as follows: "I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. [...] Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment. [...] I want to put practically everything in: yet to saturate" (*Diary* 3 209). Her intention to eliminate any unnecessary or extraneous elements in order to capture the full essence of a moment intends an inclusion of materiality even if it is not visible at the moment. By "saturat[ing]," she implies that fiction should be rich and full of meaning, but also highlights a need for balance of matter and spirit.

Derek Ryan argues that Woolf depicts complex relationships between human and nonhuman entities as "becoming" which denotes a transformative and astatic mode of existence:

Woolf theorises the creative, immanent materiality of human and nonhuman life; that is, wary of the philosophical, ethical, and political pitfalls of individualism, binary oppositions, and transcendence, Woolf's writing offers new conceptualisations of the material world where the immanent and intimate entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies are brought to the fore. (4)

Thus, Woolf's "philosophy" to explore the "hidden pattern" "behind the cotton wool"

is crucial to see the possibility of linking modernism with materiality. Woolf suggests that the world is a “mass,” and her understanding of life as a mode of existence is connected to materiality:

[...] the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; *we are the thing itself*. (“Sketch of the Past” 72; emphasis added)

Moreover, Woolf views art and artist as inseparable from the material world because she “positions herself as part of a community of subjects, accessible through language but with no transcendent position outside it; [...] she understands language to be socially constructed and present only in its material utterances” (Banfield 29). The subject’s ability to create meaning is only effective when expressed in “material” terms, but Derek Ryan cautions against assuming that Woolf’s literature is solely concerned with materiality. What he claims, though, is that Woolf is concerned about “the possibility of being: the becoming of the material world” (3). Thus, for Woolf, the action of writing is “immanent” and a “creative process” (Ryan 2) like the existence of “atoms” or “patterns” as she states, “I make it real by putting it into words” (“Sketch of the Past” 85). She asserts that writing entails interpreting the physical world to generate meaning, and this necessitates a negotiation between materiality and spirituality.

Initiating with Woolf’s claim that everything can be proper subject matter for literature, the fundamentality of materiality in her criticism is particularly intriguing because her fiction is often analyzed in terms of spirituality and psychological realism. Challenging traditional notions of what could or should be considered appropriate sources for literary production, material objects, and sensory experiences often play a significant role in her works. This essay focuses on the importance of materiality in Virginia Woolf’s essays and argues that she emphasizes nonhuman world as an essential part of human life and literature. Additionally, it explores Woolf’s defense of the Georgian writers’ techniques, which aim to reveal human mind and personality with their relation to material entities, as opposed to the Edwardians’ tendency to use social and material details as mere facts devoid of any connection to spirituality. Additionally, her ideas on the problems of the late Victorian biography writing are discussed to clarify her belief that nonfiction often fails in capturing a person’s life by focusing solely on presenting factual and chronological information, while neglecting the deeper material, psychological, and emotional aspects of their existence. In conclusion, Virginia Woolf’s critical essays assert

her appreciation for the role of materiality as a foundation for narrative, emphasizing its importance as a means of exploring the complexities of human experience in this material world.

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