

Humboldt-University of Berlin
Modul 5: Survey of English Literatures
MAP

General Task:

Please discuss aspects of content and form of one or several texts analyzed in the seminar
“Feminist Aspects of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century English Writing”.

Specific Theme:

**Characterization of Clarissa Dalloway in the short story
“Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” by Virginia Woolf**

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Feminist Aspects of 19th and 20th Century English Writing

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I. Answers to the lecture questions

1) A literary canon comprises a group of literary works that are widely considered to be most important of a particular time period or place. An example of such a literary canon can be a collection of works from a particular country, as for instance Scotland, or of a particular period of time, as for instance the Victorian period. Whether a literary work will be canonized or not is generally decided by influential critics, scholars and anyone whose opinion is widely regarded. Reasons of a literary work to become canonized include its aesthetic value and to what extent it embodies the cultural and political values of that respective society.

2) The unusual of the Miller's Tale following the Knight's Tale is that the Miller belongs to the lowest estate. Initially, the Knight wanted the Monk to tell the next story. But the Miller insisted on going next. The Miller's interruption makes clear that the sequence of the tales is not determined by class or social status. Rather, as already pointed out in the General Prologue, the sequence depends on the characters present which allows a free and open exchange of stories among the classes. Since the Miller's Tale mocks a carpenter and the Reeve was originally a carpenter himself, the Reeve responds with a tale that makes fun of the Miller's profession.

3) One characteristic feature of Shakespeare's dramatic language is the blank verse. It is composed in iambic pentameter, implying that each line consists of ten syllables with a stress on every second syllable. Usually, the blank verse is unrhymed. With regard to figures of speech, he made excessive use of double entendre which are phrases that can be understood in either of two ways. While the first meaning is normally very obvious and straightforward, the second meaning is more subtle and can also be offensive and ironic. To achieve this effect, he also uses word play or pun. As a consequence, his plays are considered pretty funny and humorous. A last device I would like to mention is his use of the soliloquy, which is a longer solitary speech of one character. It is employed so that the audience can gain insight into the character's motivations and inner conflicts.

4) The poetic style of the Metaphysical Poets can be characterized by wit and the metaphysical conceit. By wit, I mean a combination of word play and conceptual thinking, which shows a certain degree of intellectual capacity. Often, the poems focus on and stylize unusual objects or elements. Their fitness and decency is also referred to as decorum, a term transferred from ancient rhetorics. What the Metaphysical Poets aimed at was to compare objects or elements with each other that seem to have little or nothing in common and to find a good conceit. A conceit, according to the

„Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics“ (1957), is „*an intricate or far-fetched metaphor, which functions through arousing feelings of surprise, shock, or amusement [...]. [T]he emotion evoked by a good conceit is [...] a surprised recognition of the ultimate validity of the relationship presented in the conceit.*“ Usually, conceits are quite complex and sometimes difficult to understand, which is why it is criticized that the comparison of these objects is some kind of *discordia concors*, implying that they are dissimilar and should not be compared.

5) According to Milton's God in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are responsible for the Fall of Man because they violated the one explicit command God gave them which was not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Being tempted by Satan who was disguised in the form of a serpent, Eve first ate from the tree and was then followed by Adam. After that, they experienced guilt and shame for the first time and were soon expelled from the Garden of Eden. Reflecting on the cause of the Fall of Man, Milton's God says: “.....*Whose fault?/Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me/All he could have; I made him just and right,/ Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.*”. Adam and Eve, equipped with total freedom and free will, have chosen to disobey God so that they also have to bear the consequences. Consequently, mankind itself is considered responsible for the Fall of Man.

6) Robinson returns several times to the wreck's remains to fetch guns, powder, tools and other supply. He then seeks shelter near a cave where he builds a fenced-in habitation and finds some goats to hunt. In order to keep track of the time, he erects a cross which he inscribes with the date of his arrival and marks every day. He soon grows barley and rice, dries grapes, raises goats and organizes his life. Also, he adopts a small parrot and writes a journal of his activities. When Robinson falls ill and hallucinates, he experiences a religious illumination which makes him repent his sins and realize God. He becomes religious and spends several years in peace until he finds 'Friday' which initiates the next episode of his adventure.

7) *Tom Jones* is considered a comic novel. The narrative strategy that is used to create this comic effect can be summarized as follows. First, the characters of the novel are of inferior rank and of inferior manner. Also, a great variety of characters is introduced. Second, the action itself is light and ridiculous. It is also quite extensive and contains a large circle of incidents. Finally, the diction and the style of writing is humorous and funny. To achieve this, the narrator, who is an omniscient 3rd person narrator, uses humor and irony. He also interacts with the implied reader quite often and comments on the story and the characters in a humorous manner.

8) In his 'Preface' to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth says that “[T]he principal object [of poetry][...] is to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them[...] in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and further[...]to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them[...]the primary laws of our nature”. In this context, poetic language should describe the chosen situations from common life in a plain and simple language which is also used by men and at the same time be imaginative in that it presents these ordinary things in an unusual way.

9) The Box Hill episode initiates a transformation in Emma. At the party, Emma insults Miss Bates and was criticized for it by Mr. Knightley. Her emotional response to that criticism is very intense and described in great detail and length. She begins to understand that single women like Miss Bates face a harsh reality and that her sense of superiority to others in the community was wrong. More importantly, she realizes how much Knightley’s opinion means to her. She starts to develop real feelings for him and notices that her flirtations with Frank are childish and vain.

10) In the novel Middlemarch, one of the major themes is social and political reform. This includes the education and status of women as well as the acceptance of scientific progress. With regard to women's education, one can say that Dorothea Brooke only decided to marry the seemingly intellectual and clever Casaubon because she thrived for purposeful education which mostly was denied to her. After Casaubon dies, Dorothea has to obey his last will and not marry Ladislav in order to inherit his property. Her decision to refuse the heritage and marry Ladislav nevertheless would probably have been a lot easier if women were allowed to enter the public sphere and make a living on their own. With regard to scientific progress, one can say that the young and idealistic physician Lydgate has a difficult standing in Middlemarch because his medical research and advancements are probably too liberal for the conservative residents of the small town.

11) The narrative is limited to the consciousness of the main character who in this case is Stephen when he was a baby. He perceives what is happening whereas the third person narrator is in the background and almost invisible. One can say that baby Stephen is the internal focaliser of the story. As a consequence, the story is narrated in the language of a baby, using short sentences and simple words. Even his misperception become part of the story which can be seen by words such as 'baby tuckoo' and 'moocow'. It also shows that Stephen's subjective impression matter more than the objective reality. All these perceptions are narrated in free indirect discourse, a mixture of third

person story-telling and first person direct speech. Since the subjective impressions and the flow of thought play an important role, this narrative technique is also referred to as stream-of-consciousness technique of writing.

12) Two notions of temporality can be identified in Mrs. Dalloway. One is that of clock time or linear time which refers to the outer standardized time as measured by clocks or watches. In the story, Big Ben sounds out every full hour and as the sound disappears, many times throughout the novel it says that its *“leaden circles dissolved in the air”*. This expression, however, suggests that time is ephemeral and not linear, but rather circular which leads me to the second notion of time, namely subjective or mind time. Subjective or mind time corresponds to the subjective perception of time by the characters. The individual perception of time can differ from linear time because moments can be experienced to range from just an instant to an eternity. When characters of the story perceive time to last an eternity, they often experience a privileged moment of recognition and truth in which reality reveals itself. Metaphorically spoken, they are on an island of meaning.

13) The Reluctant Fundamentalist is set in an outdoor café in Pakistan where a bearded Pakistani man talks to a nervous American stranger. Although a dialogic situation, the only one talking is the Pakistani who is also the autodiegetic narrator. Based on this frame narrative, he tells his life story about his love affair with an American woman and his 9/11-experiences and eventual abandonment of America. Since the dramatic monologue only addresses the auditor who does not reply, we can only guess the presence of the silent American stranger. This creates a tension between speaker, auditor and reader. The reader feels a gap which is meant to be there. In order to close this gap, the reader relates and connects the ambiguous pieces of information presented in the text and tries to decode the “hidden” meaning. He reads between the lines and is tempted to think, that the Pakistani is a terrorist and the American a secret agent, although it is not at all mentioned in the text. In this sense, the novel engages the reader in its play of suspicion. The previous explanations are related to the reader-response theory.

II. Characterization of Clarissa Dalloway

In the following essay, I would like to characterize Clarissa Dalloway in the short story 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street', written by Virginia Woolf. The short story, which was first published in 1923, is about a woman around her fiftieth called Clarissa Dalloway and her impressions and past

memories during a walk in post World-War I London in order to buy some new gloves. Since the outside action and the plot is reduced to a minimum level, the focus of the story rather lies at the mental processes and subjective perceptions of its characters. In order to illustrate the characters thoughts, feelings, memories and impressions, the author employs a very innovative technique of writing, which is the so-called stream-of-consciousness technique of writing. I would therefore like to briefly elaborate on that technique of writing, before I draw my attention to Clarissa Dalloway and her personal and psychological situation.

The term 'stream of consciousness' goes back to American psychologist and philosopher William James who first made use of this notion in his book 'Principles of Psychology'(1890) to refer to the unbroken flow of thoughts in the human mind. This permanent flow of thoughts happens either consciously and controlled, implying that the individual is very much aware of his own mental processes, or in a rather unconscious and uncontrolled manner. Given that the latter is quite common in day-to-day life and that the mind has plenty of unrelated sensory impressions and mental associations to deal with each day, it becomes obvious that the natural state of the mind is rather chaotic. Influenced and convinced by these new psychological insights, modern authors such as Joyce and Woolf wanted to represent this seemingly chaotic and oftentimes unconscious flow of thought in literary texts. The result was the above mentioned 'stream-of-consciousness' technique of writing. Although 18th century novelists as for instance Richardson and Sterne have already employed a precursor of that technique, there should be no doubt that Joyce and Woolf developed it further and refined it. One major advantage of this technique is that it allows and favors internal focalisation: the reader can perceive the unfolding of the story through the eyes of one or several of the characters involved in it which makes their innermost feelings, expectations and judgements totally transparent to him. At the same time, however, there remains a certain distance between reader and character because the internal focalisation is narrated in free indirect discourse and thus in third and not in first person. The effect is that although the reader is enabled to understand and identify with the character, he is encouraged to critically reflect on its subjectivity. Another advantage of the stream-of-consciousness technique of writing is that it can be used as a structural element for the text, meaning that the text can progress by a variety of different devices such as associations, memories and sensual impressions. While this allows the author to have flexibility in the structuring of the text, it is not easy for the reader to always follow the chain of association so that he is required to read the text very closely and attentively. Concerning the narrator of texts in which the stream-of-consciousness technique of writing is used it can be said that he normally does not interact with the reader. Despite being omniscient and capable of external and internal

focalisation, the oftentimes extradiegetic narrator prefers to be invisible which creates the illusion that he is not present at all. The preceding discussion of the development and the advantages of the unconventional stream-of-consciousness narrative method also constitutes the formal background of the short story 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street'.

Clarissa Dalloway is introduced to the reader as a “*charming woman, posed, eager [and] strangely white-haired for her pink cheeks*”(Woolf: p. 234 middle). She is in her early fiftieth and thus in what she calls the “[m]iddle age”(Woolf: p. 235 bottom). Her family background is strongly aristocratic and can be traced back to her great-great-grandfather, who “[a] hundred years ago [...]had [already] walked down Bond Street”(Woolf: p. 237 top). From her early childhood, she remembers a situation in Kensington Gardens, where the queen passed by and the Nanny told her to “*stop dead still and bow to the Queen*”(Woolf: p.235 middle). This shows that she was taught that obedience and loyalty to the queen is an important value to have in one's life. As was normal for an upper class girl of the Victorian period, Clarissa was raised in a conservative way so that she later becomes an aristocratic lady respected by society. It can be seen, however, that there are liberal elements in her education. In her youth, she and her friends were allowed to have “*long walks in the country, talking, about books, what to do with one's life*”(Woolf: p.235 bottom), which probably would not have been possible for every upper class girl. It also shows her interest in literature and books. Later then, she studied at *Oxford University* (Woolf: p.235 top), where she must have been among the first women who were allowed to study there and have a higher education in general. A woman who studies was very exceptional for the late 19th century and a feminist achievement because it enabled her to receive an intellectual education and enter the public sphere which at that time was dominated by men. Since Clarissa really seems to like literature and “*Shakespeare's Sonnets[,]she knew them by heart[and][...]Cranford of course[...][where] she remembered the broad pages[,]the sentences ending[,] the characters [and] how one talked about them as if they were real*”(Woolf: p.236 middle), she probably studied literature at Oxford. Despite these liberal elements in her education, the conservative values that were handed on to her since her early childhood are deeply rooted in her value-system. Throughout her whole life, Clarissa has grown up to become an upper class woman who is surrounded by a network of other upper class women. She takes part in social gatherings as for instance that “*at the Embassy last night*”(Woolf: p.234 middle), where she can interact with upper class people of her kind who can share her conservative beliefs and love for the queen and the monarchy.

To continue with the situation after World War I, it can be said that the value-system and beliefs previously described are challenged as a result of a profound change in society. Different dimensions can be identified here. First, the technological progress became visible in the cityscape. More and more vans and cars joined the carriages in the streets and “[o]mnibuses joined motor cars; motorcars vans; vans taxicabs; taxicabs motor cars”(Woolf: p.236 bottom), all of which increase the impression of speed in Clarissa's perception. At the same time, “the air [is] stirred with energy [and] [m]essages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty”(Woolf: p. 235 bottom), meaning that electrical towers and telegraphic wires decorated the cityscape. Second, a change in morals favored a more permissive behavior. It has apparently become socially acceptable for “mothers of Westminster with mottled breasts [to give] suck to their young [in the park or for] [q]uite respectable girls [to lie] stretched on the grass”(Woolf: p.235 middle), as Clarissa critically observes. Also, she observes “an open motor car with a girl, alone,[...][who] looked washed out [and] half asleep [and] [a]nother motor car [...][with] a girl of that age paint[ed] black round her eyes[...][and] a young man with a girl, at this hour” (Woolf: p.236f. bottom). The roaring twentieth with the short dresses and the long nights out must have been quite offensive to her. Finally, new innovative forms of art have established. As for literature, Clarissa saw, that in the shop-window of Hatchard's book shop, “there was that absurd book, *Soapy Sponge*”(Woolf: p.236 middle). With regard to painting, she noticed that the picture dealer had one of these “odd French pictures[...][which looked], as if people had thrown confetti -pink and blue- for a joke”(Woolf: p.237 middle). The latter refers to the impressionist period of painting and to pointilism in particular, in which a specific mood or a fleeting impression is painted by use of many little dots. Although she compares her idea of art with the impressionist style of painting, she cannot accept it, for “[i]f you had lived with pictures(and it's the same with books and music)[...], you can't be taken in by a joke”(Woolf: p.237 middle). Ironically, this pointilist style of art that she considers to be a joke can be found everywhere in the text: there are numerous examples in which the narrator paints with words, vowels and sounds and creates a mood and impression similar to that in painting. Also, since Clarissa probably neither would have liked nor approved the stream-of-consciousness narrating method, it could be argued that the form of the text contrasts with her point of view. It therefore supports and illustrates the profound changes taking place in society after World War I.

In the context of these changes, one can imagine that Clarissa Dalloway feels rather inconvenient. One of her reactions with regard to this inconvenient feeling is to hold herself upright. This behavior, however, can be interpreted quite differently, depending on the situation she is in. When in the beginning Clarissa is confronted with the traffic on the street, it says that “[p]ride held her

erect, inheriting, handing on, acquainted with disciplin and with suffering”(Woolf: p.234 middle), which refers to her educational background and aristocratic upbringing. The mentioning of the word suffering also implies that in the inside, she feels anxious or depressed. Later then at the Buckingham Palace, when “*a motor car passed out the gates [and] the soldiers saluted*”(Woolf: p.235 middle), it is the pride for the queen and the monarchy which holds Clarissa upright, since “*it matters so much to the poor [...]and to the soldiers*”(Woolf: p.235 middle). Here, she also reflects on the colonial war in South-Africa and the superiority of her own race, which contribute to her pride for the queen and the monarchie. A third situation in which Clarissa holds herself upright is when she contemplates the death of Jack Steward who “*[wi]ll never know that [middle age is the devil][...], for he never once thought of death [and] never [...] knew he was dying*”(Woolf: p.235f. bottom). This leads me to death as a central theme of the text and Clarissa's reflection. Due to World War I, many of those who survived lost their loved ones. The incident Clarissa remembers where “*Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night[...]eats] her heart out, because that nice boy was dead, and now the old Manor House[...]must go to a cousin*”(Woolf: p.234 bottom), prototypically describes the misery and pain of those who survived and lost their loved ones. The impact of the war on the population must have been tremendous. This also holds true for Clarissa. In order to express her melancholia, she quotes a passage of a poem by Shelley in which a mother mourns for her dead son. The fact that she keeps repeating this passage several times throughout the text also shows that she tries to make sense of the war. This is not an easy task for her, because her innermost beliefs are shattered, as can be seen by her statement in the shop that “*simply one doesn't believe[...]any more in God*”(Woolf: p.238 bottom). It could therefore be argued that what Clarissa really fears is not so much the change in the outside world, but rather the non-existence of God. She probably lost her faith in God and the natural order of the monarchy. But how could she then make sense of the world? The following passage shows her answer to that question:

But if Dick were to die to-morrow, As for believing in God – no, she would let the children choose, but for herself [...]she would go on. But why if one doesn't believe? For the sake of others, she thought, taking the glove in her hand, The girl would be much more unhappy if she didn't believe.

(Woolf: p.239 top)

Although her most profound beliefs are shattered, for the sake of others she would go on. Here, others refers to the working class people. This is where the tragic of her character comes into play: Would working class people such as the shopwoman really be much more unhappy if Clarissa did not believe? This would imply that they are morally inspired by the upper class people and their

faith and determination. Or is she merely deluding herself into thinking that this would be the case? If the latter was true, one can argue that Clarissa has consciously or unconsciously decided to keep her old value-system and beliefs (,which can be a result of a self-defence mechanism in order to preserve her psychological integrity). Consequently, she orientates herself towards other upper class women with whom she can identify, as for instance Lady Bexborough who she thinks is *“like a queen at a tournament, though she had nothing to live for and the old man is failing and they say she is sick of it all”*(Woolf: p 237 middle). At the same time, Clarissa is confronted with a new type of upper class woman which she considers to be *“vacant; like a figure on a Japanese fan[...], too vacant perhaps, yet some men would adore her”*(Woolf: p.237 bottom). Apart from her psychological inclinations, the two quotations also hint at the fact that the old aristocracy was suffering from the changes and about to dissolve. Clarissa also hesitates to hand on the aristocratic values and tradition, when she says that *“[a]s for believing in God [...] she would let the children choose”*(see above), which refers not only to her daughter Elizabeth, but also to the next generation of young people.

To sum up, I would like to say that Clarissa Dalloway is a complex and multilayered character who lives in a time of profound change. Born and raised in an aristocratic family, she reflects on society and the aftermath of World War I. Her impressions, memories and judgements reveal her shattered beliefs and her desire to make sense of the world and find new meaning. Although she finally does find some sort of new meaning, she still faces an uncertain future. In this sense, she represents a whole generation.

III. Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street*. 1923. Course material

Ringvorlesung. *Handouts*

Eigenständigkeitserklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich die vorgelegte Seminararbeit selbstständig, guten Gewissens und ohne weitere als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel verfasst habe.

(Ort, Datum)

(Christian Geike)