

Mrs. Dalloway (1925)
Literary impressionism, modernism, and the modern novel

1. Some tenets of impressionism: questioning "objectivity," static reality.

- a. Late 19th-century French art movement - assuming that color is not inherent in a thing, but changes according to light. Analogy of the horse on the hill.
- b. "Light" emblemizing point of view - "can you shed some light on my problem?"
Philosophical problem: in total darkness, or if we can't see things, do things exist?
"Thanks for pointing that out - I didn't see that."
- c. Artist responsible for **seeing** what's actually there, not simply **looking to find a** preconception of what should be there. **Perspective** related to light: the shapes of things change according to the angle from which they are viewed.
- d. Visual technique rejected by the prevailing Academy as insufficiently rigorous, classical, "proper."
 - i. French impressionists' enlistment of unusual techniques for "seeing" **made them "see" things that were considered inappropriate or obscene.**
 - (1) Example: Manet's "Olympe," a reworking of conventional Titian "Venus of Urbino." But Manet, instead of painting Venus, shows her as being frankly a prostitute - all mythical wish-fulfillment is stripped away and Manet sees her for what she is. Implicitly he indicts Titian as a pornographer and a hypocrite. You can imagine how well this went over at the Academy.

2. Woolf's contemporary literary impressionists - James, Conrad, Ford - and their theories.

- a. Theory relatively new to the novel - changing over from commercial format of Dickens and Trollope.
- b. Victorians paid little conscious attention to technique - elaborating on what the 18th century novelists had already done.
 - i. Examples of Victorian theorizing: Thackeray talking about "presenting the sentiment of reality" and Dickens describing himself as "romantic realist."
Bronte talking about "presenting truth" - fuzziness of language problematic.
- c. Henry James the most influential of the male theorists. "Art of Fiction" and Prefaces to the various New York editions of the late novels.
 - i. Represent life through a single consciousness (What Maisie Knew exemplifies the limited consciousness).
 - ii. Perception itself - not action - is the novel's subject. "The novel. . . is a personal, a direct impression of life."
 - (1) **Little or unusual ordering of perceptions makes things messy but more realistic.** (Read section of Ford Madox Ford's "A

Personal Remembrance" from dissertation.) **Distortion of time (and R-brain loss of clock time).**

- (2) **Sense impressions guide consciousness.** We don't think abstractly - we tend to be stimulated by **things**. Conrad called these "controlling images." "Heart of Darkness" and the rivets.
- (3) **Moralizing - and the intrusion of an "omniscient narrator" - is forbidden as it clouds the reader's judgment.**

3. **Paradox of anti-theory: impressionistic theorizing contradicts principles of impressionism itself.** Ordered, rationalistic, "objective," prescriptive, intended morally to guide the reader in understanding. Many famous impressionistic artists, such as Monet, refused to theorize altogether.

- a. **Woolf's slightly different, slightly more correct theoretical position: defending impressionism through a story in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and through pictorial examples in "Modern Fiction." Bennett/Woolf quarrel.** She had no use for prefaces, as she indicates in "Memories of a Working Women's Guild" (1930):

I would rather be drowned than write a preface to any book whatever. Books should stand on their own feet. . . . If they need shoring up by a preface here, an introduction there, they have no more right to exist than a table that needs a wad of paper under one leg in order to stand steady" (228).

Woolf (in "Modern Fiction") describing fiction in terms of light - confining within, not arranged around the outside in a theatrical way:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all side they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if the writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be not plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. **Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.** Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display? . . .

Also, her rejecting the hidden egotism and bias of "objectivity" in "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" as she delivers her paper:

And if I speak in the first person, with intolerable egotism, I will ask you to excuse me. I do not want to attribute to the world at large the opinions of one solitary, ill-informed, and misguided individual.

4. **How does the reader interpret/find meaning in impressionistic art?**

- a. **The necessity of reading character:** ". . .every one in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practised character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help" ("Mr. Bennet" 96).
- b. **The last paragraph of Mrs. Dalloway.** One of Woolf's favorite ways of making a point was to take a familiar form - the last paragraph of the novel as a conclusion or epilogue, for example - and turn it around. Instead of getting full explanation of what happens, she "leaves it up to our imagination" and depends on our ability to have read the book closely to be able to interpret the novel.