

What makes literature “real” to us? Modernist approaches to literary realism

Introduction and Objectives:

The following activity is designed for foreign students of English literature. It centers on specific questions and debates stemming from critiques and re-evaluations of realism in literature at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century in English literary Modernism. Prior to the activity below, students should be presented with some of the critiques of the realist tradition Virginia Woolf laid out in her essays “Modern Fiction” (1921) and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924). In addition, students should read Woolf’s short story “Kew Gardens” (1921) in order to discuss and answer the questions in the worksheet below in groups. The questions for debate focus on the text itself, but also on the nature of narrative in broader terms.

The objectives of activity are threefold:

1. to acquaint and engage students with debates arising in English literary modernism about literature’s ability to reflect “real life” in a text.
2. to examine the narrative techniques used by Woolf in “Kew Gardens” to reflect “real life”. Some of these may be considered innovative or experimental (namely the use of shifting focalization throughout the story)
3. to reflect on the term “realism” when applied to literature or narrative in general: What is it about fiction or narrative that makes it “real” for readers? What conditions are essential for us to perceive a story as reflecting our own personal reality?

Materials:

- Excerpts/quotes from “Modern Fiction” (1921) and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924)
- “Kew Gardens” (1921)
- Worksheet with discussion questions

Bibliography

- Woolf, Virginia. “Modern Fiction.” *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, edited by David Bradshaw, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 6–12.
- Woolf, Virginia. “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, edited by David Bradshaw, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 32–36.
- Woolf, Virginia. “Kew Gardens.” *Monday or Tuesday*, edited by Paul Negri, Dover Thrift Editions, 1997, pp. 39-46

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1. Divide the story into sections: how many different parts is the story composed of? Comment on the structure.

2. How can we describe the narration? Who is the narrator? What about the “point of view” or the focalization?

3. Choose one of “the couples” who appear in the story. Comment on how the structure affects what we, the readers, know about them.

4. List possible themes of the story (keep in mind common themes of Modernism)

5. In class we mentioned Woolf's critique of earlier writers and her desire to "capture" life as it really is in her writing. In her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919), she wrote that "The 'proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss".

1. How does her vision of fiction apply to "Kew Gardens"

2. In your personal opinion, what aspects or themes are integral to fiction? What makes fiction "real" to you (think writing, films, movies, any form of narrative)