

**Woolf in the Thirties: (Re)interpretations  
(Sélei, Nóra: *A másik Woolf*. Debrecen: Debrecen  
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The other Woolf. Why, is there more than one Woolf? The title of Nóra Sélei's monograph suggests so and answers this question by explaining in what sense there are two of her. Virginia Woolf is widely regarded as one of, if not the, most prominent female modernist writer of the 1920s. Author of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* (among others), she became a key figure of the feminist movement thanks to her essay *A Room of One's Own*. However, for decades her critical reception claimed that she broke with modernism in the 1930s and revisited other genres such as the historical novel and biography, as well as returning to realism. Sélei's volume, however, provides a much more sophisticated reading of the conspicuous differences between Woolf's high modernist works and the output of her last decade.

The monograph examines three novels (*Flush*, *The Years*, *Between Acts*) and a book-length essay (*Three Guineas*) written by Woolf in the thirties. It analyses them in order to find out in what ways they are related to each other and to Woolf's previous works, and to prove that their apparent break with modernism is not what it seems. The book contains three introductory chapters in which Sélei details her thesis, positions the four texts in Woolf's corpus and provides a thorough overview of their critical reception. She also elaborates on the various approaches she adopts while examining each text: gender studies, intertextuality and cultural studies are among these. The fourth to eighth chapters each provide an analysis of one of the four works, and the last part of the book summarizes the main results and returns to the thesis to reach a conclusion.

Sélei begins by briefly outlining Woolf's oeuvre and the Woolf canon to which the four texts are constantly compared. This canon consists of three works: *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), referred to in the monograph as the "trilogy" (11). These novels are regarded as modernist masterpieces while Woolf's later works appear to take a step backwards: *Flush* (1933) seems to be a Victorian biography and a novel of manners, *The Years* (1937) is often said to be a return to realism and the historical novel, *Three Guineas* (1938)

is an essay and *Between the Acts* (1941) a novel of a day spent in the iconic English countryside at the staging of a village's pageant play. Séllei, however, argues that these works should not be viewed as a complete and aimless return to the realist paradigm. On the contrary: she reveals that while Woolf did return to certain literary traditions and models, it was done consciously and in order to discover how the discourses of culture and literary influence 'write' and 're-write' each other and how they create the basic notions of cultural identity, such as nation, gender, home, the other, and collective memory and trauma (15). Séllei states that the four works written in the thirties converse both with the cultural traditions and Woolf's previous works (17) and that their intertextuality and cultural (self)-reflexivity are typical of literary works written in the thirties (18).

After phrasing her thesis, Séllei outlines the theoretical background and methods of her analysis. These include studying the reception of Woolf's works, taking a gender-sensitive approach, looking for intertextual elements and providing close readings of the four texts. The chapter dealing with critical reception groups the studies into two sub-chapters based on their approach to Woolf and her works. The texts introduced in the first sub-chapter look at her as a "(female) modernist," meaning that the feminine traits of her works were mostly regarded as weaknesses by the masculine discourse (48). This attitude prevented some critics from fully appreciating her modernism and her works were labelled as insignificant (Lewis qtd. in Séllei 30), elitist (Leavis qtd. in Séllei 35) and second-class (Daiches qtd. in Séllei 42). Of course, there were others who managed to see the value of Woolf's fiction but it was not until the paradigm shift in the seventies that she was recognised as a "*female* modernist" whose fiction was accepted and later praised for its author's politics. In the second sub-chapter Séllei mentions some of the numerous studies and monographs published prior to 2007 which not only changed the reception of Woolf as a female writer but also broadened the list of her texts analysed. One of these is a monograph by Makiko Minow-Pinkney (published in 1987), which identifies a major feature of feminist works, including those of Woolf: they attempt to question gender identities based on binary oppositions (Minow-Pinkney qtd. in Séllei 60). Séllei concludes the subchapter by agreeing with those who argue that questions of gender are always involved in cultural discourses just as literature is always embedded in discourses of power and politics (65).

Séllei then goes on to clarify certain critical and theoretical issues. She explains for example that it is not evident that the politics – including the gender politics – of authors are fully present in their texts. With reference to Elizabeth Grosz she states that the author is not enough for a text to "have a gender;" it is up to the reader to assign (or not) a gender to it in a performative reading process. But if the reader decides to assign a gender to the author and the text, it might influence

the interpretation of the latter (85). Séllei then proceeds to examine the four works from the thirties and argue that they rewrite certain texts of English culture, and by doing so they question the narrative spaces used by the genres they evoke (95). That is, Woolf returns to some genres of the past, breaks their traditions and uses them to talk about sexual and gender politics, especially about women. Séllei finds that the four works in question contain examples of all kinds of transtextuality: hyper-, archi-, meta-, para- and intertextuality (119). With these Woolf reflects on the traditions of English literary history, just as in her previous novels and essays.

The monograph now arrives at the first novel to be analysed: *Flush*, the biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog. It seems to be both a biography (or a parody?) and a novel of manners, while also reflecting on Woolf's novels from the 1920s. This way it establishes a connection between the literature of the Victorian era and modernism. It starts an intertextual conversation with the genres mentioned above while it – perhaps – also functions as an allegory of Woolf's own forbidden love affair (133). In Séllei's close reading of the novel, she finds, among others, that the parts dealing with pure-bred dogs might be read as allegories of fascism (152). But more significant is the description of Mr Mitford, who represents Victorian fathers and husbands with their absolute power over their wives and daughters – a phenomenon condemned by the narrator. The text also leads the reader through the spaces of the Victorian novel and especially its feminine spaces. It aims at re-exploring historical, literary and cultural discourses with the help of modernist narrative techniques and intertextuality to remind readers that these discourses are the sources of all our notions (180).

*The Years* is another novel which returns to realism – the family saga, the domestic novel and novel of manners – but does so with the intention of rewriting its traditions and rethinking its cultural spaces. Séllei examines these spaces carefully and finds that they do not seem to work in Woolf's text, and even the narrative technique is changed: *The Years* does not have the omniscient third person narrator of family sagas; instead, everything is told from a character's viewpoint (188). The novel contains several interludes and this establishes an intertextual connection with *The Waves* and also explores the pillars of the cultural myth of Englishness (200). As for the cultural spaces, Séllei describes both the spaces for men and women. Colonel Pargiter's club becomes a symbol for Britishness and Englishness, a space for men to discuss politics, culture and economics and for "male bonding" (203). But if *The Years* is a masculine family saga, it might also be a historical novel articulating nationhood. It is surprising then to find out that history is almost left out of the novel. Each chapter deals with an arbitrarily chosen year: they are not connected to great events either in the history of the family (except for one year), or in the history of Britain or Europe (211). This could be due to Woolf's opinion on history: she regarded it as the classical masculine epistemology (209) and in

*Three Guineas* the narrator suggests that women should not reflect on war at all, not even mention it (215). After examining the cultural spaces for men, Séllei turns to women and the living room. She points out that while the opening scene of the novel evokes the domestic novel, the events suggest a loss of comfort and homeliness where the angel in the house, the mother, is dying. The apparent conclusion is that both the masculine and feminine cultural narratives are in crisis (237).

*Three Guineas*, Woolf's book-length essay, started out as an experimental novel containing essays and chapters from a longer novel. The novel later became *The Years* and the essays were published as a separate work. The text uses the traditions of the (rather masculine) genre with a female speaker. The views expressed in it are feminist, anti-fascist and pacifist and the essay examines how the codes defining gender work in cultural discourses and what steps are necessary in order to change these codes (252). Séllei draws parallels between Woolf and Foucault since in her essay Woolf poses questions regarding the structure of society and carries out a discursive analysis of power and knowledge way before Foucault's works (263). Woolf's aim, Séllei notes, is to overwrite the existing homogenous past and construct a new narrative.

The last work analysed by Séllei is *Between the Acts*. Published posthumously in 1941, it is a novel concerned with discovering how English cultural history (and in particular the English novel and play) contribute to the formation of the collective 'we' (294). It recounts the performance of a pageant play in a small community through the use of allusions and the rewriting of important literary discourses. The villagers present a play every year on the same day, a practice that can be regarded as a performative act contributing to the formation of their collective identity. One of the major features of the text is the idyllic harmony which is taken by Joshua D. Esty as one of the constituents of Englishness (301). Séllei points out that by using the pageant play in her novel Woolf goes back to the Middle Ages and this rediscovery and rewriting is just as critical as those of the previous three works (302). The setting is not as idyllic as seems on the surface. Séllei argues that the marks and scars left on the land by the different ages are allegories of the damage done by the English historical narrative (313). She goes on to analyse the play, the players and the audience and finds that Miss La Trobe is not the successful, independent, strong and artistic figure personified by Lily Briscoe from *To the Lighthouse*. This is not the same representation of the modernist writer (347).

After examining all four works, Nóra Séllei draws the following conclusions: Woolf's works written in the thirties do belong together based not only on their narrative techniques but mostly on their cultural self-reflexivity. These works are closely connected to each other and to Woolf's previously marginalized texts and as a result an "other Woolf" is constructed whose widely accepted modernist trilogy now seems less emphatic. This shift in focus puts Woolf's oeuvre in a new light opening up fresh possibilities for interpretation.