

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Critical Assessments



Edited by
Eleanor McNees

VOLUME II

Critical Responses to the Short Stories, Sketches
and Essays, Feminist Treatises and Biographies

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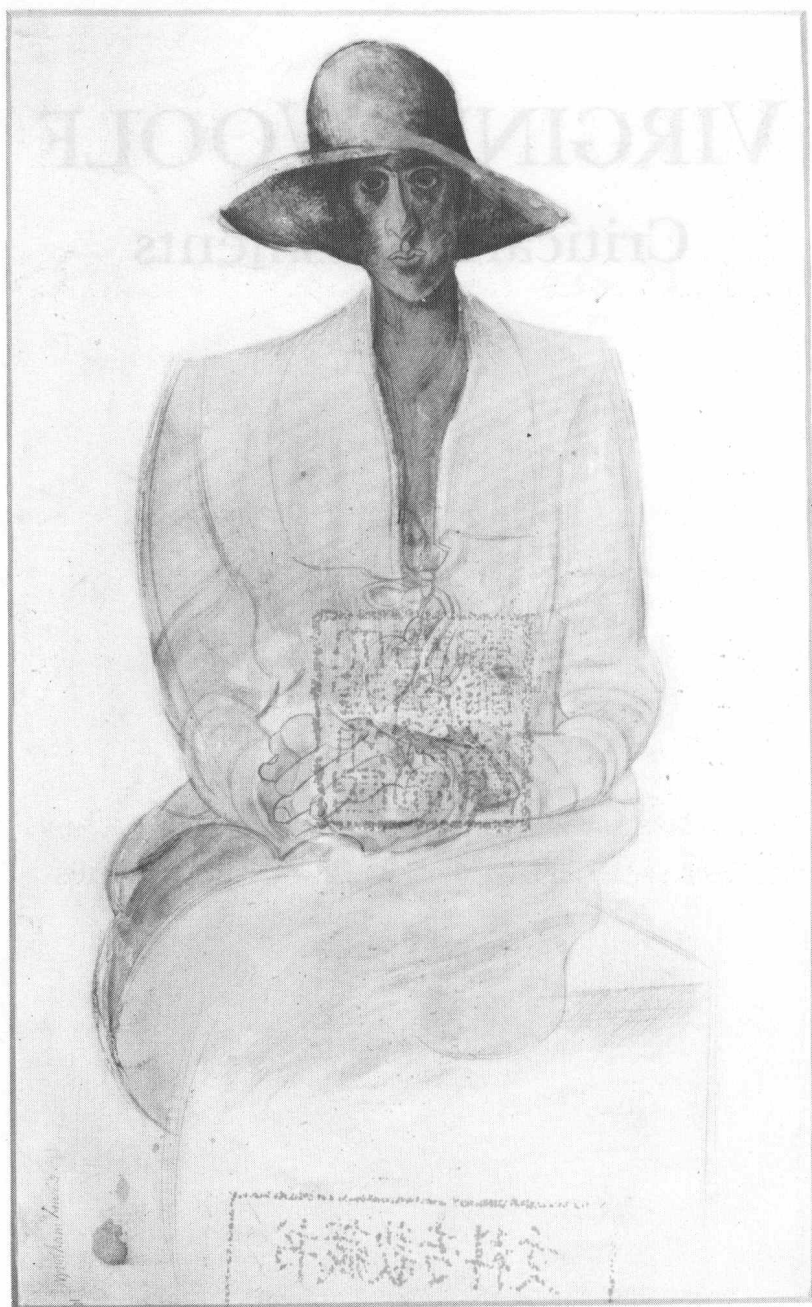
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VIRGINIA WOOLF

Critical Assessments

1897



Portrait of Virginia Woolf by Wyndham Lewis.
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Short Stories and Sketches

‘Kew Gardens’

1919

‘Kew Gardens’



KATHERINE MANSFIELD

If it were not a matter to sigh over, it would be almost amusing to remember how short a time has passed since Samuel Butler advised the budding author to keep a notebook. What would be the author's reply to such a counsel nowadays but an amused smile: 'I keep nothing else!' True; but if we remember rightly, Samuel Butler goes a little further; he suggests that the notebook should be kept in the pocket, and that is what the budding author finds intolerably hard. Up till now he has been so busy growing and blowing that his masterpieces still are unwritten, but there are the public waiting, gaping. Hasn't he anything to offer before they wander elsewhere? Can't he startle their attention by sheer roughness and crudeness and general slapdashery? Out comes the note-book, and the deed is done. And since they find its contents absolutely thrilling and satisfying, is it to be wondered at that the risk of producing anything bigger, more solid, and more positive—is not taken? The note-books of young writers are their laurels; they prefer to rest on them. It is here that one begins to sigh, for it is here that the young author begins to swell and to demand that, since he has chosen to make his note-books his All, they shall be regarded as of the first importance, read with a deadly seriousness and acclaimed as a kind of new Art—the art of not taking pains, of never wondering why it was one fell in love with this or that, but contenting oneself with the public's dreary interest in promiscuity.

Perhaps that is why one feels that Mrs Virginia Woolf's story belongs to another age. It is so far removed from the note-book literature of our day, so exquisite an example of love at second sight. She begins where the others leave off, entering Kew Gardens, as it were, alone and at her leisure when their little first screams of excitement have died away and they have rushed afield to some new brilliant joy. It is strange how conscious one is, from the first paragraph, of this sense of leisure: her story is bathed in it as if it were a light, still and lovely, heightening the importance of everything, and

SOURCE *Novels & Novelists*, ed. J. Middleton Murry, 1930; rpt. Boston, Beacon Press, 1959: 36–8.

filling all that is within her vision with that vivid, disturbing beauty that haunts the air the last moment before sunset or the first moment after dawn. Poise—yes, poise. Anything may happen; her world is on tiptoe.

This is her theme. In Kew Gardens there was a flower-bed full of red and blue and yellow flowers. Through the hot July afternoon men and women ‘straggled past the flower-bed with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed,’ paused for a moment, were ‘caught’ in its dazzling net, and then moved on again and were lost. The mysterious intricate life of the flower-bed goes on untouched by these odd creatures. A little wind moves, stirring the petals so that their colours shake on to the brown earth, grey of a pebble, shell of a snail, a raindrop, a leaf, and for a moment the secret life is half-revealed; then a wind blows again, and the colours flash in the air and there are only leaves and flowers . . .

It happens so often—or so seldom—in life, as we move among the trees, up and down the known and unknown paths, across the lawns and into the shade and out again, that something—for no reason that we can discover—gives us pause. Why is it that, thinking back upon that July afternoon, we see so distinctly that flower-bed? We must have passed myriads of flowers that day; why do these particular ones return? It is true, we stopped in front of them, and talked a little and then moved on. But, though we weren’t conscious of it at the time, something was happening—something . . .

But it would seem that the author, with her wise smile, is as indifferent as the flowers to these odd creatures and their ways. The tiny rich minute life of a snail—how she describes it! the angular high-stepping green insect—how passionate is her concern for him! Fascinated and credulous, we believe these things are all her concern until suddenly with a gesture she shows us the flower-bed, growing, expanding in the heat and light, filling a whole world.

Virginia Woolf's 'Kew Gardens'

◆

JOHN OAKLAND

Although recognised as a fascinating short story, 'Kew Gardens' (1919) has received little detailed textual examination despite attracting varied interpretations. E. M. Forster, as a contemporary of Virginia Woolf and while admiring the piece as 'vision unalloyed', thought that there was no allegorical sense, no moral, no philosophy and no form in it. 'It aims deliberately at aimlessness, at long loose sentences that sway and meander; it is opposed to tensity and intensity, and willingly reveals the yawn and gape'.¹ Later critics have stressed the pure observation, colours, airiness, lightness and associational randomness of the proceedings. Some have argued that the story should best be regarded as an experiment in formal organisation which would eventually free Woolf from the restrictive conventions of Edwardian literature. Woolf herself, writing to Vanessa Bell in 1918 of the unpublished work, called it 'a case of atmosphere' and wondered whether she had 'got it right'.² Other commentators have seen 'Kew Gardens' either as a destructive merging of personality into impersonality, or as a picture of fragmentation which reflected the chaos and disharmony that Woolf is supposed to have found in the world. Harvena Richter, for instance, considers that:

... the snail's-eye view of the gardens and people walking by the flower beds—who appear merely as feet or vague butterfly-like forms—contributes to the story's theme of life as a phenomenon of exquisite but meaningless pattern and colour. The use of the snail, her symbol of the 'victim', deepens the emotional effect of beauty-and-horror which the theme suggests.³

Given these responses, it is salutary to re-examine, against a background of Woolf's literary principles, what is actually being said in the story, as well as how it is being said. For 'Kew Gardens' is more than atmosphere, insubstantial impressionism or an experiment. Arguably, it is not an

expression of meaningless life but, (on the contrary, reveals a harmonious, organic optimism. The choice of such a short piece for close reading is appropriate, since it is perhaps more central to Woolf's fiction than has been generally accepted, and contains in embryo many of the issues of form, theme, content, character, plot and action which occupied her in all her work.)

While these are, unfortunately, loaded terms in contemporary criticism, they are all symbiotically subsumed in Woolf's design under 'form', to include both technical and thematic concerns. So that theme was not merely the subject matter of a story, but more appropriately the essential significance of the total work revealed through its organisation. Although it has been frequently argued that Woolf's fiction lacks the traditional ideas of plot, action and character, 'Kew Gardens' can be very adequately analysed in these terms, while accepting that here they are minimal and couched in special ways. Indeed, Woolf's creative method is perhaps more conventional than has been granted, and within it the old categories still operate.

Woolf herself was conscious of their inherent value in her attempts to organise all the various aspects of form. Writing of the proposed composition of *Jacob's Room* (1922) in words which reflect the already completed 'Kew Gardens', she remarks that:

I'm a great deal happier . . . today than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose that one thing should open out of another—as in an unwritten novel only not for 10 pages, but 200 or so—doesn't that give the looseness and lightness that I want; doesn't that get closer and yet keep form and speed, and enclose everything, everything? . . . but conceive (?) *Mark on the Wall*, *K.G.*, and *Unwritten Novel* taking hands and dancing in unity. What the unity shall be I have yet to discover; the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance two weeks ago.⁴

These views show that Woolf did deliberately work in terms of theme and form, that she was concerned to show one thing opening out of another in good narrative fashion, and that this creative process should demonstrate a thematic unity in the work, culminating in a final resolution. (The attempted balance between aesthetic emotions and controlling literary principles, which was to include everything in organic shape, is also echoed in Woolf's comments on Vanessa Bell's paintings where she saw severe design and logical beauty suffused with colour, warmth and light.⁵ Such preoccupations are as applicable to an interpretation of 'Kew Gardens' as they are to her longer works, and indicate the rooted nature of the story.

Woolf's search for a fictional form which would allow her to communicate her particular view of life and the modern consciousness was mainly expressed in her famous comments about the conventions of Edwardian literature. Life was not 'a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged', but a 'luminous halo' allowing the mind to receive 'an incessant shower of

innumerable atoms', each differing in intensity, quality and duration, which created a particular identification at a specific moment in time. Once glimpsed, this fleeting impression passes to be replaced by a succession of others.⁶ While such views may seem inadequate psychology and involve a too passive conception of perception,⁷ they do nevertheless reflect the framework in which Woolf's fiction is set.

Although this emphasis upon the fragmented temporary rendered by impressions and associations superficially suggests passivity, many of Woolf's characters, even in a short piece like 'Kew Gardens', do respond to stimuli and assert themselves. Such reactions are part of a movement towards a unified meaning, and also have an identifying quality in the presentation of character over a period of time. Terms such as space, perception, time, relativity and subjectivity have been frequently used by critics to identify Woolf's immediate fictional world, with a warning that the vision is only transient. But 'Kew Gardens' invites us beyond the surface impressions to a larger, growing reality. It is significant that Woolf was very aware of December 1910 (the first London Exhibition of Post-Impressionist Paintings) as being the date for a new consciousness.⁸ The Exhibition proclaimed that the earlier Impressionism was dead, and that Post-Impressionism would rescue the object from mere light and air by concentrating upon firmer pictorial construction and interconnected form. In its translation to fiction, this emphasis obviously implied both an organic structure and a thematic centre beyond impressions. These were the means to the end, not ends in themselves, so that painting's representation in space would be echoed in fiction's arrangement over time.

Woolf was initially attracted to Post-Impressionist thinking, in spite of later changing views, since she had reacted to the Edwardian literary concentration upon the alien and the external, opposed the arbitrary and limiting conventions of Naturalism, and maintained that Realism, by centring upon its narrative business, failed to capture both the vitality of the living moment and the reality behind it. (Her fiction initially focuses upon the characters' interior responses to associations) Implicit in this process, as it is actually conveyed in works such as 'Kew Gardens', is both an acceptance of the temporariness and fragmentation of the initial impressions, but also, in a time-lapse continuum, a realisation of a continuing character identification composed collectively of these moments and the reactions to them, so that a wider version of life and selfhood is promoted.

The initial impressions constitute the primary texture of experience and awareness. The organisational function then creates formal coherence and harmonious themes out of the moments. 'Kew Gardens' is structured to present a series of points of view, authorial comment and descriptions, progressing from one experience to another by interlocking devices of association. The various stages of the story appear to be very consciously planned in a formal and thematic attempt to create order despite (or