Kew Gardens Study Guide

Kew Gardens by Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

The story was published on May 12, 1919, by Hogarth Press, a publishing enterprise cofounded by Woolf and her husband Leonard in 1917. For the first edition, Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell fashioned two woodcut illustrations to accompany the text. When the third edition was printed in 1927, Bell's illustrations appeared on each page throughout the text.

The story was also reprinted in Woolf's *Monday or Tuesday* (1921) and in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (1944), edited by Leonard Woolf. In the past decades it has been anthologized many times, representing a slice of Woolf's artistic mastery and reflection of her keen insight into what it means to be human.

Author Biography

Virginia Woolf is one of the most admired authors of the twentieth century. She was born on January 25, 1882, to Julie and Leslie Stephens in London, England. Sir Leslie Stephens was a very influential writer and critic who sternly and methodically published volume after volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, of which he was the first editor. Growing up, Woolf met many famous writers including George Meredith and Henry James.

Woolf's parents had each been married before; her mother Julia brought three children with her and Leslie two children to their marriage. Woolf's family was large and she later lamented growing up with a lack of privacy and of time to spend with her mother. The Stephens family was financially well situated and employed servants who helped keep the family running in their London home. Woolf remembered her mother working nonstop to raise her three children, the stepchildren from Stephen's previous marriage, and her four children with Leslie. In her fiction, Woolf often concentrates on the pain, sacrifice, and beauty of mothers, probing the quiet agony of a solitude seemly ironic in a world of children, society, and fast-paced innovation. Julia died when Woolf was thirteen, precipitating Woolf's first major breakdown. Her father was increasingly morose and detached after the death of his wife and died himself in 1904 when Virginia was twentytwo. After Sir Leslie Stephen's death, she and her older brother Thoby lived in London and started the Bloomsbury Group discussions. The Bloomsbury group was a collection of young people in London who met to discuss art, politics, and literature. During this time, Woolf taught at Morley College and wrote literary reviews.

Woolf's older brother Thoby died of typhoid in 1906 after returning from a vacation in Greece. The same year, Woolf's sister agreed to marry Clive Bell. In this time of loneliness and depression, Woolf struggled to write. In 1912, Virginia Stephens married Leonard Woolf who had been a friend of older brother Thoby and had participated in the Bloomsbury conversations. While they continued to write, the Woolfs also started their own publishing company. From modest beginnings in 1917, Hogarth Press would eventually publish works by Sigmund Freud, T. S. Eliot, and Katherine Mansfield and enable Virginia Woolf to publish any of her own work without any interference.

Woolf's major literary production began with her novel *A Voyage Out* (1915). It and her next novel, *Night and Day* (1919), were long novels with more conventional plot patterns. Later more experimental prose works include *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and, perhaps the most challenging of Woolf's novels, *The Waves* (1931). While Woolf's novels were masterpieces of subtlety, manner, and insight, her nonfiction, such as *Three Guineas and A Room of One's Own*, powerfully advocate for women's rights and critique structures of patriarchy.

Woolf eventually took her life in the middle of World War II. Overwhelmed with the hatred of war, she and her husband, who was Jewish, had signed a suicide pact that would ensure they not be taken prisoner if Hitler invaded England. After suffering from

depression for most of her life and enduring many nervous breakdowns, Woolf had had enough. After a morning of writing on March 28, 1941, she walked down to the river, loaded her pockets with stones and drowned herself.

Woolf's career responds to the contradictions of her youth and of a larger Victorian society in which men of the proper English class where shuttled into positions of authority while women stayed at home, bound by sexual mores and domestic, family duties that isolated them. But, to reduce Woolf merely to restating the conventional terms of gendered double standards or to her bouts with depression is to miss the vibrancy, energy, and resistant force of her writing and her mind.

Plot Summary

The story begins by setting the garden scene: a mild, breezy, summer day in July with "perhaps a hundred stalks" of colorful flowers, petals unfurled to meet the sunlight. The light hits not only the flowers in an "oval-shaped flower-bed" but the brown earth from which they spring and across which a small snail is slowly making its way. As human characters saunter thoughtfully or chattily through the garden and through the story, the narrator returns again and again to descriptions of the garden and the snail's slow progression.

Men and women meander down the garden paths, zigzagging like butterflies, as the narrator hones in on particular conversations. The first group the reader meets is a husband and wife walking just ahead of their children. The husband, Simon, privately reminisces about asking a former girlfriend to marry him. As he waited for her answer, he hoped that the dragonfly buzzing around them would land on a leaf and that Lily would then say yes. The dragonfly never settled and Lily never said yes. Now, as he turns to his wife Eleanor, he wistfully remembers dragonflies and silver shoe buckles.

Simon then asks his wife if she ever thinks of the past; she replies, "'Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under trees?"' She tells her husband that when she was just six years old she received "'the mother of all my kisses all my life.'" When painting in the garden, a grey-haired old woman suddenly and quietly kissed the back of her neck. The family vanishes as the mother calls to Caroline and Hubert and the narrator tells of the snail beginning to move, his antennae quivering as he navigates a leaf that has fallen in its path.

The second set of feet walking by the flower bed belong to an elder and younger man. The younger man, William, walks steadily with an "expression of perhaps unnatural calm" as his companion talks "incessantly" and walks erratically, smiling and murmuring as if holding a conversation with himself. His speech is cryptic and sporadic, but he believes himself to be talking to "the spirits of the dead" now in "Heaven."

The old man tells William that Heaven was "'known to the ancients"' and with the war the spirits are restless, "'rolling between the hills like thunder.'" William listens as the older man proposes to record and collect the voices of dead husbands by putting an electrical device at the head of widows' beds. He then suddenly catches sight of a woman who appears to be dressed in "purple black" and exclaims "'Women! Widows! Women in black.'" William catches his older friend, perhaps his father or patient, by the sleeve and distracts him by pointing to a flower. The old man looks confused and then proceeds to bend his ear to the flower, to listen and to begin a mysterious conversation as if the flower were a telephone. The old man then begins to speak of having visited the "tropical roses, nightingales" and mermaids of Uruguay, hundreds of years ago with the "most beautiful young woman in Europe." William moves him along through the garden with increasingly "stoical patience."

Two elderly women "of the lower middle class" curiously follow the odd old man who listens to flowers. One of the women is "stout and ponderous" and the other "rosy-cheeked and nimble." They are fascinated by his eccentricity especially because they think the man to be of an upper "wellto- do" class but wonder if he might indeed be mad. After scrutinizing the old man, they give each other a "queer, sly look" and continue with their conversation.

Their conversation is filled with names "Nell, Bert, Lot, Cess, Phil" and with "he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says—"; the "ponderous woman" stops listening, letting the words fall over her as she stares at the flowers and rocks back and forth, hypnotized by their light and their color. Abruptly she suggests to her companion that they find a seat and have their tea.

As these two women walk away, the snail begins to traverse the leaf in his path by crawling under it. As he moves under the leaf, a fourth pair of feet come by the oval flower bed.

A young man and woman, Trissie, in the "season" just before "the prime of their youth" stand in front of the flower bed, each with a hand on Trissie's parasol, pushing it into the earth. Their conversation is commonplace—about the price of admission to the garden on Fridays—and filled with long pauses and spoken with monotonous voices. Despite this seeming simplicity, each seems to look with wonder at the ordinary objects around them. The parasol, the coin in the young man's pocket with which he will pay for their tea, and the flowers around seem to mean something inexplicably important. The young couple stands with eager anticipation and speaks "words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning." Suddenly, the young man declares to Trissie that it is time they had their tea and he steers her onward as she "turns her head this way and that" thinking about "orchids and cranes among wild flowers" and wondering what is down each garden path.

The story ends with a final reflection on the garden in which people, like butterflies and flowers, color the vast, orchestral scene. Bodies of people and plants dissolve into a misty atmosphere, punctuated by brilliant flashes of light out of which arise "Voices, yes, voices, wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with such depth of contentment, such passion of desire, or, in the voices of children, such freshness of surprise." But the final note of the story places this garden scene in an ominous context of droning city life, of immense industry, and of world war outside the garden—"a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

In "Kew Gardens," the narrator follows different visitors to the gardens, giving the reader brief snapshots of their lives through small descriptions as they reach the same flowerbed. The story begins with a description of the oval-shaped flowerbed. The flowers are red, yellow, and blue. They have petals that are heart or tongue shaped. As the petals fall to the ground, they stain the earth with these colors for a moment. Petals from the flowers soar through the sky in the summer breeze. The flowers' colors flash in the air. On this July day, men, women, and children walk through the gardens. As the people move through the gardens, their movements resemble butterflies. They zigzag in all directions to get a better view of the flowers.

One man stands 6 feet in front of a woman. Her stroll has purpose. She looks back once in a while to be sure her children aren't too far behind them. The woman's husband, Simon, keeps his distance intentionally, although perhaps he does this unconsciously. He wants to think to himself. He remembers coming to the Kew Gardens 15 years ago with a girl named Lily. That day they sat by the lake. He begged her to marry him all afternoon, as he watched a dragonfly circle around them. He remembers Lily's shoe. It was square with a silver buckle at the toe. The entire time he spoke to her all he could see was her shoe. Her foot moved impatiently as he spoke and for this reason he knew what her response would be without having to look up at her. The whole of her seemed to be in her shoe, just as all of his love and desire seemed to be in the dragonfly. He thought if the dragonfly settled on a leaf, it would be a sign that Lily would say yes to his proposal. But the dragonfly did not settle. It kept whirling around and around in the air.

In hindsight, Simon is glad that Lily said no because now he is married to Eleanor, with whom he has had children. Simon asks his wife, Eleanor, if she ever thinks about the past. He tells her that he is thinking about Lily and asks her if this bothers her. Eleanor says she doesn't mind. She tells him that everyone thinks about the past, especially in the Kew Gardens, a place that is filled with young couples that lie together under the trees. She says these couples are like ghosts of one's own reality. He explains that the memory of past love for him is tied to dragonflies and shoe buckles. Eleanor tells him that her memory of the Kew Gardens is of a kiss, 20 years ago. She and other little girls sat near the lake with their easels, painting pictures of the water lilies. She had never seen red water lilies before. Someone kissed her on the back of the neck. The kiss distracted her. She was unable to paint that afternoon because her hands were shaking. She allowed herself 5 minutes on the hour to think of the kiss. She says the kiss was precious, "the kiss of an old woman with a wart on her nose, the mother of all my kisses all my life." Eleanor calls to her children, Hubert and Caroline, telling them to catch up. The family moves on from the flowerbed.

In the oval flowerbed a snail's shell is stained with red, blue, and yellow color for a couple of minutes as it passes under the flowers. The snail moves slightly in its shell, and then it labors over the loose, crumbled dirt. The snail appears to have a definite goal. A high-stepping green insect attempts to cross its path. It moves rapidly past the snail in the opposite direction. The snail looks over the cliffs of dirt and deep-green hollows. Flat blades of grass are like trees. Pebbles are like gray boulders. The snail must make its way through all of this. Now four human feet stand in front of the snail.

Two men stand at the flowerbed. The younger of the two looks unnaturally calm. His gaze is fixed in the distance, ignoring the older man who is speaking. The older man has an uneven, shaky walk. His stance is like an impatient horse. He jerks suddenly as he talks continually. Between statements he smiles to himself and speaks again, as though the smile is the answer to his question. He is talking about the spirits of the dead. He says they are telling him about their experiences in heaven. He says that heaven was known by the ancients and with this new war happening, they are rolling between hills and thunder. The man talks about a machine and a widow, a woman dressed in black. He has caught sight of a woman in the distance dressed in purplish black. The man takes off his hat and places his hand on his heart. He hurries toward the woman, gesturing wildly. The young man, William, catches him by his sleeve. William distracts the older man by pointing out a flower. The man looks at it confusedly. He leans in close to the flower as if he is listening to a voice inside it. He talks about the forests of Uruguay. He says he visited these forests hundreds of years ago with the most beautiful woman in Europe. William moves the man forward, away from the flowerbed. William's face shows stoical patience. As the older man talks on, William's patience grows deeper.

Next to approach are two elderly women of the lower-middle class. One is stout and ponderous. The other woman has rosy cheeks and is nimble. The crazy man fascinates them. The narrator claims this is common of those in their class; the sight of crazy wealthy people captivates them. The women are too far away from this man to be able to tell if his gestures indicate a mental health problem or if they are simply eccentricities. They give each other a sly look as they watch the man, and then they return to their own conversation. The rosy-cheeked woman talks on, but the ponderous woman stares at the flower bed. She looks at the flowers and sees them as a sleeper waking from a heavy sleep. She sees brass candlesticks, reflecting light in a familiar way. She closes her eyes and opens them again. She still sees the candlestick. She ceases pretending to listen to the other woman speaking. She doesn't hear a word as she stares into the flowerbed. Finally, she suggests that they should find a seat and have their tea.

The snail is still trying to reach its goal. It has considered every possible method of moving through the flowerbed without going around the dead leaf in front of it or climbing over it. Finally it decides to crawl beneath it. It inserts its head in the opening when a young couple approaches the flowerbed. The young man tells the woman he is accompanying that they are lucky it isn't Friday. She asks him if he believes in luck. He says that on Friday admission to the gardens is sixpence. She asks if it is not worth sixpence. He asks what "it" means. She replies "anything." They take long pauses before they answer each other and speak in a monotonous way. As the couple stands at

the end of the flowerbed, they both press the young woman's parasol into the soil. His hand rests on top of hers. This action expresses their feelings for each other, as do their insignificant words. The narrator states that these are words with "short wings for their heavy body of meaning." Their feelings are evident to the two of them as well as others. The young man speaks to the young woman, Trissie, telling her they should have their tea now. She asks where they have tea in the garden. As she looks over a long grass path, she quickly forgets about the tea and wants to explore the gardens. The young man moves her forward.

One couple after another moves through the gardens with the same aimlessness. They pass the flowerbed and are enveloped in the green-blue vapors that give their bodies substance and a dash of color. But this soon dissolves into the atmosphere. This afternoon, it is so hot that even a thrush seeks the shade of the flowers. Butterflies dance above the flowers. The glass roof of the palm house shines as if it were a whole market full of shimmering green umbrellas that were opened in the sun. The voices of the summer sky murmur with the fierceness of its soul. The shape of all the colors of men, women, and children can be spotted on the horizon. In the heat, bodies sink low. They lie motionless on the ground, but their voices waver like flames. These are wordless voices of contentment, passion, and desire. Children's voices echo freshness and surprise. The voices break the silence of the summer sky. Beyond the gardens, the din of the omnibuses is heard as their gears change and their wheels turn. Beyond the gardens the city murmurs. In the gardens voices cry out as flower petals flash colors in the air.

Analysis

"Kew Gardens" is greatly representative of Virginia Woolf's prose style. Like some of her other work, this story uses a brief moment in time and simple event to explore the hidden nature of life. In "Kew Gardens" Woolf expresses this through the garden, insects, and the people who have come to visit the gardens. As for the garden itself, the plant life takes on a greater meaning. For the visitors, the flowers are a source of wonderment, but to many of them the garden represents something symbolic, whether it is a past memory, a vision, or a voice that comes to them from within the garden setting. The Kew Gardens reside in the middle of the city, so they can carry their visitors away from the hustle and bustle of everyday city life. As the people pass, the flowers entice them with their scent momentarily, symbolizing the way that the gardens change people physically and emotionally, albeit for a short time.

Each group that passes the flowerbed that is central to the story invokes its own symbolism from the garden. For Simon, it is his memory of his former love, Lily, that comes to him in the gardens. He recalls her tapping her shoe anxiously as he proposed. This action indicated that she would say no. He put his hopes into the motion of a dragonfly that soared above him, deciding that if the dragonfly settled, Lily would say yes to him. But the dragonfly didn't settle. This represents Lily's wish to remain free. Continuing this story, Simon asks his wife if she minds that he is thinking about Lily. Eleanor tells him that everyone thinks about the past. She sees the couples in the

garden as ghosts of her own past loves, symbolizing that she has her own history, apart from him.

Continuing this theme, the young couple at the end of the story reveals subtle hints of their attraction to each other as they walk though the gardens together. Through trivial conversation and subdued movements they show their affection. The young man asks Trissie to come have tea, but she wants to explore the gardens further. Symbolically, she wants to further her experience instead of cutting it short. This is reminiscent of Simon and Lily, and because it is the final story, while Simon's was the first, it gives the reader the feeling that the garden's effect has come full circle.

For William and the elderly man, the garden's flowers serve as a sedative. When the elder man tries to chase after a woman who he believes is a widow to whom he must speak ,William distracts him with the flowers. The old man, who claims to speak to spirits of the dead, believes that the flowers are speaking to him. This perhaps is symbolic of how nature is meant to connect humans to their spiritual selves. This notion is presented again in the case of the two elderly women. As one woman speaks, the other sees the image of a candlestick among the flowers. She assumes she is seeing things, so she closes her eyes and reopens them. This possible hallucination connects this character to the old man. Similar to the old man's hallucinations, the candlestick presents an image of spiritual life.

While these visitors pass through the gardens, a snail is plotting his journey across the flowerbed at which the four groups of people in the story stop. To the snail, the grass, pebbles, flowers, and clumps of soil all present an enormous challenge that stands in its way. The snail seems to represent the fact that all the visitors have their own challenges to face. Unlike the snail, they journey into the gardens for a respite from the outside world.

The author explores the idea of a respite in the final paragraphs of the story, in which she describes the contrast of the city noises outside. The first comparison is of the motors of the omnibuses, used to move people quickly, to the "aimless" movement of the people who walk through the gardens. The final comparison is through noise. The murmur of the city outside is compared to the voices inside the gardens that cry out as the flower petals soar through the air, revealing a burst of color. The petals, which were first mentioned in the story's opening lines, represent the epiphanies perceived by each of the visitors of the Kew Gardens.

Characters

Eleanor

The wife of Simon and the mother of two children (Caroline and Hubert), Eleanor walks through the garden chatting with her husband who tells her of his failed marriage proposal to Lily years before in Kew Garden. Eleanor remembers herself as a little girl, painting by the lake with five other girls. As Eleanor painted, a "grey haired woman with a wart on her nose" suddenly kissed her on the back of the neck, a precious kiss that became Eleanor's "mother of all [her] kisses all [her] life." When her husband asks whether she minds if he talks about the past, she responds that she does not mind and asks, "'Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees . . . one's happiness, one's reality?"'

Narrator

The narrator seems able to notice almost anything but only slightly interprets the various interactions, conversation, and details. The focus of narration is the flowerbed and those who walk by it or, like the snail, move unnoticed by any character in the story. The story moves from depicting small, telling details of specific interactions to a more general reflection on the wide network of life in which the garden, its flowers, snails, and patrons all coexist.

Older Man Who Listens to Flowers

Accompanied by William who steers him through a garden course, this older man smiles and talks "almost incessantly" to himself. To William he speaks of "spirits of the dead" and their experience in Heaven. He tells William of an electrical contraption that would allow a widowed woman to talk to the spirits in Heaven; the older man then gets distracted by the "purple black" dress of a woman who he seemingly mistakes as a widow. William distracts the older man by drawing attention to a flower, to which the confused older man listens momentarily before changing the subject to the "forests of Uruguay, which he had visited hundreds of years ago in company with the most beautiful woman in Europe."

Simon

The husband of Eleanor and father of Caroline and Hubert, Simon walks just six inches in front of his family in Kew Gardens, reminiscing about a failed proposal to a past love named Lily. He tells Eleanor about his reflection, asking Eleanor if she minds his thinking about the past. When she replies that she does not mind, Simon explains that

his feelings about Lily and her rejection of his proposal can be symbolized by "a square silver shoe-buckle and a dragon-fly" in Kew Garden.

The Snail

The snail with a shell of "brown circular veins" makes its way slowly across the floor of a flowerbed as the human characters saunter by, lost in their own thoughts and conversation. While the characters have no occasion to even notice the snail, the narrator comments on its progress throughout the story.

Trissie

A young man and woman (Trissie) on the verge of youth's prime, walk by the snail's flowerbed. The young man talks of the price of admission on Friday while Trissie asks about belief in "luck" and the experience of walking through Kew Gardens. Nervously, she stands with him, looking at the flowerbed as they express themselves in "words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning" and lean together on Trissie's parasol, hands slightly touching as the parasol sinks into the earth. Abruptly, the young man suggests they have tea and Trissie excitedly responds "Where does one have one's tea?"

Two Elderly Women of the Lower Middle Class

These unnamed characters are lower middleclass women who follow curiously the erratic movements of the older man whom William directs. One of them is "stout and ponderous" and the other "rosy-cheeked and nimble." After their fascination with the older man fades, they "energetically" resume a "complicated dialogue" that the stories narrator records as a mere lists of names, of "I says" and "she says" as well as "Sugar, flour, kippers, greens" and "Sugar, sugar sugar." As the "nimble" woman talks, the "stout woman's" thoughts wander as she stares into the oval flower bed before suggesting that they find a seat and have tea.

William

The younger of two men walking together in Kew Gardens, William wears "an expression of perhaps unnatural calm." He steers his companion through the garden with care, listening to the older man prattle on almost nonsensically about Heaven and Uruguay. William directs the older man's attention to a flower to keep him from approaching a woman that seems to remind the old man of a widow dressed in black.

Young Man with Trissie

As the young man accompanies Trissie on their walk through Kew Gardens, he touches the two shilling piece in his pocket with which he will pay for tea. He nervously tries to grasp the reality of his new experience as a man in a garden with a woman.

Themes

Loneliness and Alienation

Each human character in the story seems lost in his or her own reminiscences. Despite walking with someone in Kew Gardens, the narrator emphasizes ways in which their thoughts are their own. Some of the characters are merely alone with their thoughts, like the first couple who remember by themselves and then talk with each other about their memories. Other characters, like William and the "ponderous woman," seem lonely. They walk with a companion who does not seem to notice them. In the end, the man and the "ponderous woman" are perhaps not merely lonely but alienated from those around them. The old man's strange behavior seems to keep him locked into a world all his own, unable to connect with anyone around him.

By making a garden the focal point of this rumination on ideas of aloneness, loneliness, and alienation, Woolf evokes the biblical image of the garden of Eden from which the Adam and Eve were cast out. Woolf's story seems to suggest that the very language that humans beings use to connect to other human beings is not only filled with misunderstanding but can itself be a wall that prevents communication.

The Modern World

The final paragraph of the story situates "Kew Gardens" in an ominously vast and overbearing world of the machinery and systems of industrial production that undergirded World War I. The old man seeking to hear the voices of dead husbands might be a picture of a more general experience in which war and industry link to destroy peoples' families. The contraption he stutters on about is an ambivalent symbol, serving to denote a way in which he can reconnect to those who have been lost and ironically connoting his own isolation from William who walks beside him.

Gender Roles

Each couple that passes through the garden seems to represent ideas regarding what men and women are supposed to do in society. The husband and wife operate in an understated harmony even as they reflect with a hint of melancholy on youthful days when the world seemed full of unlimited potential. The old man and William imply the inability of men to connect with one another, even about things as devastating as death in war. The "lower middle class women" illustrate the seeming futility and emptiness of working as servants; their conversation is but an inadequate distraction from the fact they seem to have little to love in life. The final couple is a young man and woman who are just learning the roles that they are expected to play. As the young man takes charge of Trissie, steering her toward tea for which he will pay with the coin in his pocket, one is left hoping she or they will find a way of straying down those curious garden paths.

Generally, Woolf seems to point out the way women depend on complementing men. Marriage, however, does not seem to grant happiness or connection. Rather, it seems to imply a certain loneliness of motherhood, the eventual alienation of widowhood, or the reputation of being a lower-class spinster. Woolf also seems to emphasize the way young men are pushed into taking charge, stifling attempts at openness and honesty with women or other men. As the machinery of life drones on outside the garden, the men seem called to take their place in a system that will use them up.

The Natural World

Although the idea of a garden might imply the vibrancy, life, and innocence of nature, Kew Gardens is described in terms that emphasize the more formal effect of color and angular play of light. The narrative tone emphasizes geometric shapes, discrete objects, and characters' trajectories as they advance through the garden. This emphasis seems to implicate the garden in the "vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly" outside the garden in the city. It is important that Kew Gardens is not a spontaneous expression of natural forces but a space whose construction was engineered and constructed and whose flowers, trees, and grass were meticulously planted and cultivated. While inviting the reader to consider the garden as a touchstone of natural force, the garden seems to offer a formalistic screen across which peoples' lives fleetingly cast their shadows as the snail methodically proceeds in his arduous trek across the fertilized floor of the flower bed.

Style

Point of View and Narration

The narrator is an omniscient third person. The narrator sets the scene and is able to delve into each character's private thoughts. The true narrative insight appears not so much in what is said or illustrated but in the demonstrated inadequacy of the characters' conversations.

The narrator illustrates the garden scene in a fashion that deflects emphasis from an individual person or group of persons. People appear in a series that is implicitly continuous and repetitive. The snail offers the only consistent character and even "his" progress is not only mundane, but it is not narrated to completion; the story ends with the snail in the act of tentative progression. The descriptions of the garden are omniscient about the visual impression of the garden—the play of light, the shape, angle, and placement of garden objects, and the diffusion of color. As a result of these narrative emphases, the story deflects attention from a human- centered narrative to a more detached suggestion of how humans fit in a larger formal structure.

Setting

The story takes place in Kew Gardens, the Royal Botanical Gardens near London. Presumably, it unfolds near the time Woolf wrote the story in 1917. The gardens provide a public space that people of different classes share, even if they do not directly associate. Similarly, the practice of having tea denotes a continuity in these Londoners.

Symbol and Images

Kew Gardens is the story's title and central image. The narrative development of Kew Gardens overrides any specific characterization and challenges what readers normally expect in a story. While one normally thinks of a garden as providing a backdrop to the plot of human drama, be it comedy or tragedy, here the garden overwhelms any singular human persona.

The image of the garden, then, operates as a symbol on at least two different levels. First, the garden implies the idea of nature in which humans are at harmony with organic growth processes. The biblical garden of Eden is perhaps the most forceful manifestation of this harmony. To people living in the modern era of machinery and urbanity, is the idea of nature just another invention? By rendering images of the garden with emphasis on geometry, light, and perspective, the story uses the garden as an ironic symbol of humanity's distance from nature and the ensuing manufacture of natural spaces.

This ironic "garden" echoes the ironic companionship in the story. Each set of those promenading Kew Gardens seems to offer a deceptive picture of understanding and solidarity. The narrative perspective lights on each pair to demonstrate the ways in which they are actually walking the grounds quite alone.

Historical Context

World War I

Before World War II, the First World War was simply known as the Great War. As the twentieth century began, Germany, France, England, Russia, and Austria-Hungary intensely guarded their international territorial and economic interests, even to the point of threatening war. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist in 1914 sparked a shooting war between the major power alliances (the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente) of Europe. After four years of war, approximately ten million people were killed and over twenty million were wounded.

Death of Queen Victoria

In 1901, Queen Victoria died. She had become queen in 1837, succeeding William IV, and had enjoyed the longest reign of any British monarch. In her old age she was very popular. Throughout her reign, she fought hard to maintain England's colonial control throughout the world. She also was opposed to granting women the legal right to vote.

Industrial Age

The beginning of the twentieth century seemed both a time of immense promise and a chilling reminder of the cost of "progress." Cities were places of international commerce and culture where artists and writers lived and associated. Cities were also the space of factories; and in a time before governmental standards that regulated workplace safety, the age of workers, and the length of the working day, trade unions fought for humane conditions. Gardens and parks had long provided a space for people to mingle, now they took on an added role of providing a space of natural beauty in an industrial environment.

As the world headed for the political domino reactions that triggered world war, the industrial age seemed less of a promise and more of a deadly mechanism with an uncontrollable force. Factories produced immense amounts of artillery and other implements of war, and people questioned the value of an industrial capability that could so easily be harnessed and directed for the destruction of other human beings.

Impressionism and Narrative Perspective

As the legacy of nineteenth-century imperialism laid the groundwork for the economic state of affairs in the twentieth century, traditional ideas of what was literature and how to tell a story also changed. Painters like Seurat, Monet, Picasso, and Chirico challenged traditional notions of perspective in the visual arts; instead of assuming that

art would present a cohesive vision of the world, artists proposed exploring the ways in which all perspective was partial, fractured, and even violently dissonant.

Women's Rights

Woolf's story presents at least three types of women. First, there is the dutiful wife walking a step behind her husband with an eye on her children. Second are the lower middle-class women who seem lost and lonely. Third and finally is the curious young woman who stifles her inquisitive enthusiasm to follow her boyfriend to tea. In these slight pictures are different visions of women's roles in the aftermath of a Victorian era in which conventional morality scripted women to be self-sacrificing domestic angels, lonely old spinsters, and virginal, innocent young girls in need of male direction. As devastating as World War I had been to young men of her generation, Woolf considered the institution of marriage a similar devastation as young girls were disciplined to march into the role of a good wife.

At the turn of the century, participants in the women's movement became more and more militant in their demand for political enfranchisement. "Kew Gardens" was published in the year after the fourth Reform Bill was finally passed in 1918. The Reform Bill gave all women over the age of thirty the right to vote. Not until 1928 were voting rights in England the same for men and women.

Throughout her career, Woolf addressed the stereotypes that limited and oppressed women, not only by denying them the same opportunities as men, but also by limiting their sphere of influence to a stifling and small domestic space. She would urge women to kill the "angel in the house," that is to self-reflect and combat the unreasonable and stagnant expectations placed on women regarding their intellectual, sexual, and public lives. Killing the angel required not only facing the public force of sexism but examining the ways sexism was internalized by women themselves.

Critical Overview

Upon its publication, "Kew Gardens" enjoyed modest praise. In 1919, the *Times Literary Supplement* published an unsigned review of "Kew Gardens," praising the story for its strange beauty and atmosphere. Since then, the story has remained a favorite of Woolf's short fiction. In the 1970s, literary attention on Woolf revived and intensified. In 1985, Susan Dick edited *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, which includes "Kew Gardens."

The general critical attention paid to Woolf has produced articles dedicated to "Kew Gardens." In "Pursuing 'It' Through 'Kew Gardens'" of 1982, Edward Bishop addresses what he calls Woolf's capture of "the essence of the natural and the human world of the garden." Bishop's essay provides a clear summary of the story's critical history, from the *Times Literary Supplement* through subsequent critics who attempted to account for the story's atmospheric quality by exploring how language relates to life experience, to sight, to expectations of narrative progression, and to the vital forces driving human experiences into narrative formulas of forward progression.

In 1997, Alice Staveley's "Visualizing the Feminine: Fashion, Flowers and Other Fine Arts," considers the genesis of "Kew Gardens," arguing that it represents a dialogue that Woolf was having with Katherine Mansfield in 1917 while Woolf was simultaneously writing the long novel, *Night and Day*. This connection to Mansfield anticipates the story's republication in 1927, just as Woolf begins writing *Orlando*, a novel about Vita Sackville-West with whom Woolf enjoyed a meaningful and intense relationship.

In *The Sisters' Arts* (1988), Diane Gillespie discusses Vanessa Bell's illustrations to "Kew Gardens." Gillespie uses the short story to demonstrate the process of negotiation with Woolf through which Bell created the cover design, the other illustrations, and the sustained marginal illustration of the 1927 edition published by Hogarth Press.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Johnson teaches in the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania. In this essay, he examines how Woolf uses nuances of light and form to reflect national disharmonies that culminated at the end of the Victorian era.

In naming her story "Kew Gardens," Woolf chose a specific space to present the melancholy scenes of the characters' conversation. While the garden might connote an Edenic space in which human beings realize a natural completeness or contentment, Woolf's Kew Gardens transforms, as the story progresses, into a mere screen across which pass the transient presences of individuals. By understanding the local Kew history, one better understands the thematic irony of Woolf's garden.

Kew Gardens is outside London on the south bank of the Thames, covering over two hundred and eighty acres. It was established in the late seventeenth century and its history parallels changes in England's status as an empire. Before 1841, the garden was a retreat for royalty. In response to general public criticism that the garden had fallen into a state of neglect and to a national inquiry into the management of royal gardens, Queen Victoria transferred responsibility for maintaining Kew Gardens to national administration by the Office of Woods and Forest. Sir William Hooker became the first official director of the gardens.

Under Hooker, the garden developed into a national project that not only invited visitors to its grounds but also collected, assembled, and displayed specimens of plant-life that had been gathered from England's colonial possessions around the world. After 1885, Hooker retired and William Thiselton-Dyer became director. He developed Kew more aggressively into an arm of colonial enterprise. As Ray Desmond noted in *Kew: The History of the Royal Botanic Garden*, he even once commented to the governor of Madras (a seaport in India, then a colonial possession of England) that, "we at Kew feel individual[ly] the weight of the Empire as a whole, more than they do in Downing Street." Botanical experiments refined more effi- cient ways of cultivating lucrative plant life, such as rubber plants, which would then be distributed to England's territorial colonies throughout the world.

In 1905, Sir David Prane became director. Three years later he ushered in the first subway posters that advertised Kew Gardens as a temporary escape from the urban life. The advertisements marked a new stage at Kew, foreshadowing the entrance fee instituted in 1916. The admission fee drastically reduced the number of visitors: in 1915, attendance figures record over 4.3 million people visiting the garden; the following year the number dropped to just under 714,000 people. Tuesday and Friday were reserved as student days for observing and sketching the garden's vast collection of specimen plants. Sundays remained free. In Woolf's story, when the young man "in that season which precedes the prime of youth" comments that "they make you pay sixpence on Fridays," he may be announcing his adulthood by implying that he is no longer a student.

In the years just before the story's publication, the world had become dominated by the demands of an industrial economy in which the manufacture of war materials played a fundamental role. In the years before the war, Kew maintained a double mission of attracting the public to its grounds and assembling an imperial collection of botanical specimens. The tumult of World War I had a direct effect on Kew Gardens. Many more women become gardeners, replacing men who had been sent to the continent to fight. Additionally, beginning in 1914, Kew's grounds were put to a more practical purpose, cultivating onions. In 1918 the Palace lawn at Kew was converted to a potato field, yielding twenty- seven tons of potatoes to help alleviate the food supply shortage.

Given its publication date, it is difficult not to read "Kew Gardens" as an attempt to come to terms with the First World War. The war was devastating to Woolf, who like the rest of England, struggled to make sense out of casualties numbering 8.9 million men. How can one come to terms with the enormity of a world conflict that leads young men into trenches? What of the industrial power, technological advancement, and cultivated artistic production of which the Victorian age had been so proud?

Initially the story's garden seems to promise a space of therapeutic reflection. People strolling on the grounds move with curious irregularity, like "white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed." But this space of repose is belied by the increasingly empty conversations between characters that substitute for intimacy. In a story, one expects character development and a plot in which the characters do something; instead, the reader of "Kew Gardens" notices a fundamental shift that relegates human activity to a mere visual feature in the final paragraph. Snails and people equivalently set the stage. Instead of a backdrop for character-driven plot, the garden becomes a formal centerpiece, composed of patches of color, angles of perspective, and rays of light.

The story's final paragraph flattens characters into visual components of an expanding horizon. Instead of a separate place of peace, the garden becomes "so hot that even the thrush chose to hop, like a mechanical bird, in the shadow of the flowers." The people strolling the garden are reduced to instances in general pattern as they move: "one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passed the flower-bed and were enveloped in layer after layer of green-blue vapour, in which at first their bodies had substance and a dash of color." They become shades of "yellow and black, pink and snow white." And further, "shapes of all these colors, men women and children," wavering and then seeking "shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue." In this reduction to abstract visual effect, humanity become as fragile as an erratic "white and blue butterflies," floating in a careless and even malevolent machine world.

As people dissolve into the visual structure of the garden, the narrator links the garden to the machinery of the urban world outside of it. The children's voices no longer rupture a pastoral silence but instead are drowned by the incessant drone of "motor omnibuses . . . turning their wheels and changing their gears; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another." Overlapping each other in this vast "nest," the garden's flowers can merely flash their colors into the air.

The different meanings of the word "shade" reflects the story's loss of human center: the protective shade of a garden tree is juxtaposed with the dead spirits or "shades" of those both lost to war or the inexorable progression of history. As Simon's wife observes, "'Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees, . . . one's happiness, one's reality?"'

The seemingly crazy old man's behavior explains the story's relation to the trauma of the war. He searches for the "sprits of the dead" whom he hears "rolling between the hills like thunder." In his disorientation there is a reflection of each of the other characters' isolation from each other. The old man may be the spectacle of lunacy for the women following him, but the conversation between these sane women is superficial and lonely, consisting of a mere iteration of disconnected names and food items.

As the old man's eyes search the garden for spirits of the dead brought on by "the war," he first proposes to hook up a machine through which widows can summon the dead spirits of their husbands. Distracted by the sight of a "woman's dress . . . which in the shade looked a purple black," he tries to approach her but is caught by the supervising William, who diverts his attention with a flower. The old man bends his ear to the flower and begins speaking about "the forest of Uruguay which he had visited hundreds of years ago in company with the most beautiful woman in Europe."

There is a logic to the old man's words and actions that reflect the social tensions pervasive in England and evident in the specific history of Kew. In referencing Uruguay, the old man draws attention to the imperial design of the Kew grounds. During the nineteenth century, the garden collected specimens from around the world to complement England's imperial pride in building an empire worthy of "the ancients." Plant collectors gathered "specimens" from all over the world—Brazil, Canada, United States, Nepal, Congo, India, Ceylon, Trinidad, Jamaica, Australia, China, Japan, and Timor, to name but a small number. The old man's quest for dead spirits may violate conventions of sanity—of sequential time and ordered space—but in doing so he emphasizes the symbolic pretension of the garden's imperial collection and implies the general breakdown of the imperial social order.

His preoccupation with women and his exclamation of "Women! Widows! Women in black" points to another aspect of the story's reflection on the effect of the war. Women in the story—the wife, the maids and the young girl—seem to share a stifling dependence on men. While widows are obvious victims of the war, the story implies a broader cost to being a woman; and the social conventions that brought on the war also limited women to specific domestic roles while disenfranchising them both economically and politically. In the years before the war, women were violently contesting these limitations and the social prejudice that motivated them.

At Kew Gardens, the fight for women's rights erupted in violence just before the war. In February of 1913, suffragettes destroyed a large quantity of plants and nearly two weeks later burned down the Refreshment Pavilion. At the end of the eighteenth and

throughout the nineteenth century, the right for women to vote was a key demand in the movement for women's rights in England. It is perhaps ironic that Queen Victoria remained consistently opposed to enfranchising women to vote. After years of lobbying Parliament, the suffrage movement was dealt a crucial defeat when Prime Minister Gladstone frustrated the inclusion of women's suffrage in the Reform Bill of 1884. The women's movement became increasingly militant in their efforts to win voting rights. By 1913 when Kew Gardens was attacked, the suffrage movement had won strong public support and mustered the financial means to fund the many demonstrations; yet, many suffrage bills were defeated. When the World War I began in 1914, the question of suffrage was suspended, even as women worked in jobs now vacated by men in uniform. As the war ended in 1918, Prime Minister David Lloyd George's Reform Bill recognized the right of women to vote and to hold public office. This was the fourth in a series of reform acts that, over almost one hundred years, slowly reorganized government and extended suffrage. By 1928, voting requirements for men and women of England were finally uniform.

The garden at Kew, then, is not just an "innocent" space. Rather, it is a reflection of national imperial history. In 1919, the inherited social order of the Victorian age had seemingly betrayed both men and women, expending the former in senseless carnage and systematically limiting the latter into nearly total dependence on an ideal husband. Woolf's story punctures the symbol of this inheritance with a narrative that poses a new perspective. In her displacement of human character, Woolf echoes the dehumanization of her time and suggests a role for art that dares to challenge the conventional structure of meaning and perspective.

Source: Kendall Johnson, Critical Essay on "Kew Gardens," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kloepfer presents an overview of "Kew Gardens" through its characters.

"Kew Gardens" was first published as a small book by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press (1919) and later included in the volume *Monday or Tuesday* (1921). Woolf herself judged it "slight and short" and wrote in her diary, "the worst of writing is that one depends so much upon praise. I feel rather sure that I shall get none for this story; & I shall mind a little." Later, however, she was consoled by numerous orders for copies, "a surfeit of praise" from influential friends, and a favorable review in the *Times Literary Supplement.*

More recent critics find "Kew Gardens" an important transitional piece in which Woolf "worked out the lyrical, oblique approach in which her best later works would be written." The story, which on one level is simply about "the men and women who talk in Kew Gardens in July," is highly descriptive and visually charged with a sensuous, almost microscopic vision: describing the "heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves" on "perhaps a hundred stalks" rising from a flower-bed, Woolf writes, "The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, their red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour." Four couples pass across the field of vision: a middleaged married couple with their two children; a confused old man, accompanied by a young male companion, who hears voices; two "elderly women of the lower middle class . . . frankly fascinated by any signs of eccentricity betokening a disordered brain, especially in the well-to-do"; and a young man and woman "in the prime of youth, or even in that season which precedes the prime of youth"— awkward, inexperienced, excited.

One of the curious features of the story is that it is narrated in the third person from the point of view of a snail in the garden, "a unique but ultimately disappointing vantage point," according to one critic, "from which to observe the flow of life. Woolf has not yet found a fictional body to inhabit."

While not entirely successful, "Kew Gardens" does lay the groundwork for many of the strategies and concerns developed in Woolf's later work.

The older couple evokes Woolf's preoccupation with the passage of time and the ghosts of the past. The old man embodies the thin line between eccentricity and genuine madness, an issue of particular interest to Woolf, who was prone to episodes of debilitating depression throughout her life, fi- nally committing suicide in 1941. The young couple are caught in another space compelling to Woolf where the function and efficacy of language itself are called into question, a space punctuated with "words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far." In the section involving the two old women "piecing together their very complicated dialogue," Woolf examines the "pattern of falling words" and begins to experiment textually: "Nell,

Bert, Lot, Cess, Phil, Pa, he says, I says, she says, I says, I says—" This scene later troubled Woolf, and she worried that it "discredited" the story a little.

She is nonetheless at the beginning here of her lifelong literary project to explore language, substance, human intercourse, consciousness, and, ultimately, reality. "Stylistically, formally," the critic Phyllis Rose finds the story "exciting" but "ultimately unsatisfying," in part because although "Kew Gardens" represents "daring innovations in technique," the author "had not yet found a subject which would allow her to express her humane experience of life." And yet finally Woolf is not simply experimenting with form but writing about "depth of contentment," "passion of desire," and "freshness of surprise" as she attempts to catch, according to Rose, "the fragmentary, transient nature of what is real, people passing, wisps of conversation, nature in motion, the wafting of life."

The story ends with a long paragraph of dissolving "substance and color" as all life in the garden—"yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men, women, and children"— appears and then seems to evanesce. But if one truly listens, Woolf maintains, "there was no silence; . . . like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air."

Source: Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, "'Kew Gardens': Overview," in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, edited by Noelle Watson, St. James Press, 1994.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Oakland examines "Kew Gardens," revealing a progression of formal and thematic patterns in which "randomly individual activity has been given coherence, order, and optimism."

[It] is salutary to re-examine, against a background of Woolf's literary principles, what is actually being said in ["Kew Gardens"], 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 re- flect 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." ["Kew Gardens"], 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.

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. . . .

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

giglamps 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. While such views may seem inadequate psychology and involve a too passive conception of perception, 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. 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's] 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 because of) the fluid nature of the initial impressions.

In this process, the presentation of character through an examination of individual consciousness is central to Woolf's design. The characters in "Kew Gardens" may be sketchy, but the story demonstrate that even the minimal is composed of revelation in action, and that the apparently ordinary has significance. The characters do confront experience in their individual ways, and are engaged in the problems of choice, self-awareness and self-definition that such a confrontation forces. There is enough information in the character-presentation for the reader to analyse personality and

theme. Surfaces are penetrated to reveal a newer view of the characters' realities, as well as suggesting, in the unfolding plot, a shared experience and fate.

For, although Woolf is clearly the third person omniscient narrator who reveals as much (or as little) as she wishes, there is beyond her no one dominant character in terms of point of view. Rather, the individual characters after their various exposures (together with the narrator) make up a collective theme-voice, which is progressively expanded through the episodes. The story additionally focuses on the natural background and non-human creatures to such an extent that they anthropomorphically become characters with lives and points of view of their own. The snail, insects, butterflies, waterdrops, flowers, buses, an aeroplane, a thrush and the final voices are included within an all-embracing thematic perspective. The cumulative theme-voice of "Kew Gardens" is composed of descriptions, fragmented conversations and interior monologues which all generalise character in a dramatically creative way that eventually leads to the universality of the voices in the final paragraph.

This technique demonstrates the major process of "Kew Gardens," that of the gradual fusion of the human and the non-human into an organic whole. Formally and thematically, one thing opens out of another and all experience is fused into one reality. This theme, as some critics have suggested, indicates that behind the diversity of people and things there lies an essential oneness. More importantly for Woolf's later work, such an awareness represents the kind of organicism which would be examined at greater length in *Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931). . . . This particular kind of organicism, however, does not so much indicate pantheism with its postulation of a God, but rather a non-specific form of vitalism which, in spite of its vagueness, is nevertheless illustrated as the main thrust of "Kew Gardens."

While the initial revelations of the characters are shown in fragmented isolation, the episodic structure demonstrates the growing commonality of these experiences and develops significant patterns in the movement towards fusion. All the events share common elements such as the flower bed and Kew Gardens, but also references to relationships, restrictions, desires, purpose, introspection, consciousness and unconsciousness. From these roots rise larger interconnected themes such as the nature and perception of time, memory and space, death, the quality of understanding, the nature of love and personal relationships, the attraction and mystery of the unknown, linear and lateral movement, and the urge to freedom beyond restraints. All the characters, human and non-human, share to some degree in aspects of these various concerns.

There is nothing in the text to suggest that this qualitative movement towards unity is anything but harmonious and optimistic, and the tone is joyful rather than despairing. The story does not show the meaninglessness and horror of life, but a progress towards meaning, in much the same way as the snail, far from being victimised, demonstrates purpose and achievement. Each revelatory experience is part of and contributes to a unified reality, and the fusing processes, particularly that of human with non-human, break down differentiation in the establishment of interrelated harmonies. . . .

The story's associational structures, changing and deepening in each episode, provide constant transitions from the natural to the human and back again The catalysts for the individual revelations in this linear progression are the flower bed and Kew Gardens itself. All these experiences and movements occur between the first and last paragraphs which form the 'book-ends' or the lyrical prosepoetry of the events.

The description of the flower bed in the first paragraph, with its erotic stalk imagery, references to 'heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves,' and the 'throats' of the flowers, immediately connects the human and the natural worlds. Within the latter there is an active aggressiveness of a quasi-human type, with the conditioning influences of the summer breeze, sun and light upon petals, the earth, pebbles, leaves and raindrops. The snail is similarly coloured by the setting, and operates within the natural world in terms of the problems it faces from lateral and linear choices of movement. . . .

The shifting mixture of a linear plot and lateral experiences, together with the circling of the dragonfly in this episode and the continuing struggles of the snail, bring together, both formally and thematically, the two worlds. Such descriptions do not serve merely for decorative or experimental effect, but indicate very conscious designs. Signifi- cantly, the fluctuating themes of purpose, introspection, consciousness and unconsciousness are also introduced at this stage. For, while Simon strolls carelessly and Eleanor bears on with greater determination, he '. . . kept this distance in front of the woman purposely, though perhaps unconsciously, for he wished to go on with his thoughts.'

In spite of its brevity, much happens to Simon and Eleanor in this first human episode. They connect the past with the present through associations of love and relationships, which are additionally reflected by natural objects such as the dragonfly and the waterlilies, by humans such as Lily and the old grey-haired woman, and by inanimate objects such as the silver shoe buckle and shoes. Fusion of these elements is natural for Simon since '. . . the whole of her seemed to be in her shoe. And my love, my desire, were in the dragonfly. . . .' Furthermore, the dragonfly in its refusal to settle and confirm Lily's choice, maintains a sense of perennial flux, just as Eleanor's marking the time of the kiss with her watch is a continuous present and a universal referent, '. . . the mother of all my kisses in my life.' Similarly, for Eleanor, past and present are joined in common experiences and in the collection of other human beings in Kew Gardens. 'Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees . . . one's happiness, one's reality?' Such time and space references scattered throughout the story have structural and thematic parts to play in the unfolding theme of fusion, and are not simply superfluous. The consciousness of past and present, the dead and the living, in this first episode becomes more confused as the story progresses, when similar processes are repeated by other characters. This illustrates not only the gradual blurring sense of objective reality as against the power of association, but also the movements towards a fusion of elements in time and space.

The human interlude of Simon and Eleanor eventually shifts again into the natural world, as they walk past the flower bed '. . . now walking four abreast, and soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half-transparent as the sunlight and

shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches.' The family's earlier haphazard progress has become almost military, and the irregularity passes to the natural world, under whose conditioning the human characters now fall in partial fusion. Their reduction in size and significance illustrates the joining of the two worlds, and also invites comparison with the snail's scene, to which the transition structure now returns.

In this episode, the snail is a link between human and natural, and possesses a linear identity which is different to that of 'the singular high stepping angular green insect,' which is able to change direction at will. The snail is again briefly, like the family earlier, stained by the flowers before moving on, significantly now appearing to have a definite goal in front of it. It is faced by obstacles in its movement until its attempts are interrupted by the human. 'Before he had decided whether to circumvent the arched tent of a dead leaf or to breast it there came past the bed the feet of other human beings.' This episode illustrates not the snail's victim- status but its gradual immersion in the two worlds, its purposive manoeuvres, and its discovered possibility of choice between lateral and linear progression. . . .

[The] final paragraph of the story shows the apparent fusion of all in the common experience of Kew Gardens. The natural and the human worlds coincide in a unity which resolves all previous tentative approaches and haphazard movements. 'Thus one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passed the flowerbed and were enveloped in layer after layer of green blue vapour, in which at first their bodies had substance and a dash of colour, but later both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere.' Under the influence of the heat the irregular movements of the thrush and butterflies are conditioned into more orderly patterns, and eventually all the colours of the human and natural worlds are unified. 'Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men, women, and children were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then, seeing the breadth of yellow that lay upon the grass they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue.'

From this immersion voices rise, expressing contentment, desire and freshness of surprise, reaching beyond the purely material. But Kew Gardens is now only a microcosm of this process, for the fusing image is also applied to the adjacent city of London and its buses, '. . . like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air.' Beyond, '. . . in the drone of the aeroplane the voice of the summer sky murmured its fierce soul,' so that all the elements of the story, animate and inanimate, have been fused, and their sounds stretch beyond the earth to a further universal fusion and identification.

The Chinese box reference demonstrates precisely the main theme of "Kew Gardens" by showing the interconnection of object, or a complex of boxes within boxes, the opening of which are presumably infinite. The story's progressive uncoverings have illustrated a greater reality and fusion at each step, so that, formally and thematically, random individual activity has been given coherence, order and optimism. . . .

Source: John Oakland, "Virginia Woolf's 'Kew Gardens,'" in *English Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 3, June 1987, pp. 264-73.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Bishop explores Woolf's relationship between "language and reality," which is seen through her use of characters and techniques.

"Lucky it isn't Friday," he observed. "Why? D'you believe in luck?" "They make you pay sixpence on Friday." "What's sixpence anyway? Isn't it worth sixpence?" "What's 'it'—what do you mean by 'it'?" "O, anything—I mean—you know what, I mean."

The reader knows what the young woman means because the conversation occurs near the close of "Kew Gardens" and Virginia Woolf has already captured "it": the essence of the natural and the human world of the garden. From the beginning of her career Woolf had been pursuing the "uncircumscribed spirit" of life, but she had been frustrated by the methods of conventional fiction. Now, she makes no attempt to deal with "it" discursively□she does not, as she might have done in *The Voyage Out*, have a pair of sensitive individuals discuss the "whatness" of Kew. Neither does she offer straightforward description. The sketch represents the artistic application of Woolf's famous manifesto published only the month before in her essay "Modern Fiction": "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." In "Kew Gardens" Woolf does not document the physical scene, she immerses the reader in the atmosphere of the garden.

Her success in the piece was immediately recognized. Harold Child, writing in *TLS* [*Times Literary Supplement*] on the first appearance of "Kew Gardens" (1919) lauded this "new proof of the complete unimportance in art of the *hyle*, the subject matter":

Titian paints Bacchus and Ariadne; and Rembrandt paints a hideous old woman. . . . And Mrs. Woolf writes about Kew Gardens and a snail and some stupid people. But here is "Kew Gardens"—a work of art, made, "created," as we say, finished, four-square; a thing of original and therefore strange beauty, with its own "atmosphere," its own vital force.

Subsequent writers have agreed with Child, notice that the source of the sketch's vitality lies in the linguistic strategies of the narrating consciousness. In an early study (1942), David Daiches writes, "The author's reverie is what organizes the images and the characters; and an intellectual play uses the images as starting points for meditation." James Hafley, in his exploration of the Bergsonian concepts in Woolf's fiction (1954), argues that the sketch is about "life" in the Bergsonian sense, a "vital impetus" that is not logically explicable, and which must be "first directly apprehended and then crippled into words." But what is contradictory in Bergson is, Hafley claims, "supremely consistent and translucent" in Woolf. In the next decade (1965) Guiget focussed on the method of the piece, observing that "as the eye traces an imagined arabesque through this mosaic, the mind regroups fresh wholes in this atomized universe, breaks habitual links and associations to form others, hitherto unnoticed or neglected." In a recent consideration of Woolf's narrators (1980) Hafley returns to "Kew Gardens," locating the

"vital force" in the language itself, not in any specific quality of imagery but in the action of the voice. In the sketch narration becomes "creation rather than transmission." Yet precisely *how* this is achieved, how the mind is led to "regroup fresh wholes," how the "luminous halo" is generated, has never been adequately demonstrated. And it is only by looking very closely at the way the language operates that we can see how Woolf simultaneously creates and engages the reader with something as nebulous as an "atmosphere."

To glance first at the most obvious strategies of narration, in "Kew Gardens" Woolf dispenses with the carefully articulated structures of *Night and Day*, the "scaffolding" as she calls it. There is very little external action here—a series of couples strolls past a flower bed in which a snail is struggling to get past a leaf—and the development seems as "aimless and irregular" as the movements of the people in the gardens. On closer examination it becomes obvious that the sketch is carefully constructed: there are four couples and among them they constitute a cross-section of social class (middle, upper, and lower), age (maturity, old age, and youth) and relation (husband and wife, male companions, female friends, lovers); and their appearances are neatly interspersed among four passages which describe the action in the flower bed. Yet this pattern is not insisted upon; the juxtapositions are not abrupt or pointed. As in her later works, the progression of events (the "series of gig-lamps") has been subordinated to the modulation of emotion, and the ending conveys a sense of resolution more than of narrative conclusion. In the human encounters too a similarly understated order obtains. The pleasantly elegiac mood created by the married couple, Eleanor and Simon, gives way to uneasy tension as the old man exhibits a senility that borders on madness. The glimpse of something darker merely hints at the turmoil underlying the tranquil scene (a conjunction of beauty and terror that remains constant in Woolf's writings) before the coarse curiosity of the two women restores the lighter tone. Finally the emotions that the lovers now feel echo those evoked in Eleanor and Simon only by their memories. Thus Woolf quietly comes full circle to end with love, before shifting to a more encompassing vision of unity—the entelechy of all her works—of human beings integrated not just with each other but with the phenomenal world: "they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue. . . ."

The achieved effect of the sketch, the sense that it is an atmosphere into which one moves, follows in part from the fluid overall structure, but the reader's immersion begins at the outset with the smoothly shifting point of view. Woolf does more than set the scene in the opening paragraph, she smoothly dislocates the reader's accustomed perspective of a landscape. The first sentence, "From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks. . ., " begins with a description from a middle distance; the narrator sees the shape of the bed as a whole, but also sees the flowers as individual entities, not as a solid mass. Yet by the end of the sentence the narrator has moved much closer, to the "yellow gloom of the throat," from which emerges "a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end." And, as the light "move[s] on and spread[s] its illumination in the *vast* green spaces" (my italics) beneath the dome of leaves, the reader has been placed among the flowers and given a correspondingly different sense of scale. As the paragraph closes, the breeze "over-head" is above him

in the petals, not in the trees: "Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women. . . ." The reader now finds himself viewing the bed from within—his angle of vision is in fact that of the snail—rather than admiring the floral designs as a more distant observer.

Just as the initial description begins with and then moves beyond a conventional perspective on the scene, so the first exchange between Eleanor and Simon ("'Fifteen years ago I came here with Lily,' he thought. . . . 'Tell me, Eleanor. D'you ever think of the past?'") moves out of interior monologue and then, with "'For me, a square silver shoe buckle and a dragonfly—' 'For me, a kiss . . .'" into a new mode, one that seems to combine qualities of both thought and speech. Again, Woolf is gently forcing the reader out of his established perceptual habits, raising questions about the nature of discourse and the conventions used to render it. And, just as she has placed the reader within the garden, so with each successive dialogue she moves deeper, below the flat surface of words, to reveal that, like the apparently flat flower-bed, language too has cliffs and hollows. In doing so she dramatizes the way in which one often perceives words less as units of information than as physical sensation. Indeed, as the two women talk, their words finally cease to have more than vestigial denotative meaning for the "stout" member of the pair; they become as palpable, and as non-cognitive, as a rain shower: "The ponderous women looked through the pattern of falling words at the flowers. . . . She stood there letting the words fall over her, swaying the top part of her body slowly backwards and forwards, looking at the flowers." The image prepares the reader for the final encounter, that between Trissie and her young man. For after the brief discussion on the cost of admission (quoted at the beginning of this essay) Woolf moves into their minds, exploring the unvoiced reactions to their colloquy. It is here that the alternation between description and dialogue becomes a fusion, as the words become not merely a "pattern" but a contoured landscape, and one whose features echo those of the terrain through which the snail has been moving.

In this episode Woolf displays what will become the defining characteristic of her later prose: a flexible narrative style which allows her to move without obvious transition from an external point of view to one within the mind of a character, and back again, thus fusing the physical setting with the perceiving consciousness. Further, it is a mode which invites the reader's participation in the process, so that the reality Woolf conveys is apprehended through the experience of reading. In the passage quoted below, the reader becomes conscious of moving *among* words, just as the characters do.

Long pauses came between each of these remarks; they were uttered in toneless and monotonous voices. The couple stood still on the edge of the flower bed, and together pressed the end of her parasol deep down into the soft earth. The action and the fact that his hand rested on the top of hers expressed their feelings in a strange way, as these short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry *them* far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded *them*, and were to *their* inexperienced touch so massive; but who knows (so they thought as they pressed the parasol into the earth) what precipices aren't concealed in *them*, or what slopes of ice don't shine in the sun on the other side? Who knows? Who has ever seen this before? Even when she

wondered what sort of tea they gave you at Kew, he felt that something loomed up behind her words, and stood vast and solid behind them; and the mist very slowly rose and uncovered—O, Heavens, what were those shapes?—little white tables, and waitresses. . . . (my italics). . . .

The passage begins straightforwardly enough: the narrator notes the pauses, the tone of the remarks, the posture of the couple. But in the third sentence, as she explores the relation of the words to the feelings they are meant to convey, the narrator draws the reader into the emotions of the couple. The initial image describing the words evolves into an extended metaphor that communicates more exactly the "something" the young couple feels, and the metaphor works in part through deliberately ambiguous pronouns which both enforce the reader's engagement and unite the disparate elements of the scene.

The words "with short wings for their heavy body . . ." suggest bees—appropriate both to the garden and to the drone of the "toneless and monotonous voices" of the speakers. As the passage develops, it sustains this dual reference: "inadequate to carry them far" seems to refer as easily to the words being inadequate to carry the couple far as it does to the wings being inadequate to carry the words far. The latter proves to be the primary meaning, for the words alight on the "common objects." But with "common objects that surrounded *them*" the pronoun can refer to either the couple or the words. The latter would appear to be the logical choice, yet in the next clause, "and were to *their* inexperienced touch so massive," the pronoun obviously refers to the couple.

"Massive," however, seems to modify the "common objects"—in which case "their" should refer to the words-as-bees—unless the words from the couple's point of view are massive. This seems unlikely (they have been described as "short, insignificant"), and the following clause "but who knows . . . what precipices aren't concealed in them" perpetuates the confusion over the pronoun referent, for the reader knows that there are precipices in these common objects; he has already encountered the "brown cliffs and deep green lakes" that block the snail's path. Nevertheless, the precipices do reside in the words. The image of the bee has somehow fallen by the way, and the young man and woman now look through the words, as the older woman earlier "looked through the pattern of falling words at the flowers," to the something "vast and solid" behind the words.

I spoke of confusion, and the passage is confusing if one insists on pinning down all the referents. But through an alert and unprejudiced attention to the syntax, one can more firmly apprehend the action of the figures: what is being fostered is identification, not confusion. The reader does not find the passage muddled; rather he experiences the sense of one thing merging with another—the couple with the words, the words with the surrounding objects. And he easily makes the transition from bees to precipices, for the one expresses the activity of the conversation, while the other conveys the young man's perception of the meaning behind the words; the massiveness and solidity express the intensity of their emotions. Indeed, the image of the bee, from "words with short wings . . ." to ". . . that surrounded them," can be regarded as a parenthetical aside by the narrator, after which she returns to the consciousness of the young couple. In any case,

Woolf's supple prose ensures that while the reader is invited to attend closely he is not forced to pause. The impression of a cloudiness or "mist" that she creates derives from extreme precision, not vagueness, and it conveys exactly that sense lovers have of the world dissolving into soft focus as they become for a moment oblivious of all except each other. Further, the reader experiences the wonder at ordinary objects which follows such intense moments: "O, Heavens, what were those shapes— little white tables. . . ." Yet by using the most bathetic object available to satisfy that portentous anticipation, Woolf gently puts the event in perspective; the reader feels a sympathetic amusement toward the infatuated couple. He continues to identify with them, however, for the shock of wonder is not described, rather it is conveyed through the prose as the reader emerges from the mist of the passage.

In fact the reader is not yet fully out of the mist, for the tables and waitresses, he gradually discerns, have not been observed—they are just now taking shape in the young man's mind:

O, Heavens, what were those shapes?—little white tables, and waitresses who looked first at her and then at him; and there was a bill that he would pay with a real two shilling piece, and it was real, all real, he assured himself, fingering the coin in his pocket, real to everyone except to him and to her; even to him it began to seem real; and then□but it was too exciting to stand and think any longer, and he pulled the parasol out of the earth with a jerk and was impatient to find the place where one had tea with other people, like other people. . . .

The touch of the coin brings him back by degrees to the external world—"even to him it began to seem real"—and the reader too must struggle to regain the conventional sense of the reality of the park. For Woolf has convinced him of what she had so firmly stated in "Modern Fiction," that life "is a little other than custom would have us believe it." In any case, Woolf does not follow them to tea; the sketch closes with a vision of the human bodies, the flowers, the voices and the traffic noises all dissolving in the heat of the afternoon. The tables, the shilling, the parasol, elements she called "the alien and external," finally have far less immediacy than what Trissie could only describe as "it": the "yellow and green atmosphere" that is both ethos and ambience of the garden.

In her fiction Woolf continued to explore the relation between language and reality—both dramatically, through the experience and conscious probing of her characters, and formally, through the experimental techniques of her works. But with "Kew Gardens" she had discovered her voice, one that would remain more or less constant through the varied narrative structures she employed from *Jacob's Room* to *Between the Acts*. The quality she called "life" or the "essential thing" refused to be fixed by a phrase, but it could be arrested, briefly, by a net of words: words that evoke as well as indicate, that conspire to produce their own luminous halo, rendering (by inducing) a process of consciousness rather than a concrete picture. Thus it is that the value of her fiction derives less from the specific insights it imparts (one finds it difficult to remember the particulars of her works) than from the fact that the experience of reading initiates, in the sensitive reader, a growth of perception. We too come closer to apprehending "it" through our sojourn in "Kew Gardens."

Source: Edward L. Bishop, "Pursuing 'It' Through 'Kew Gardens,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Summer 1982, pp. 269-75.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Fleishman provides an analysis of Woolf's "Kew Gardens," which he categorizes as a linear tale.

The standard format for a critical study of Virginia Woolf is a series of chapters on the nine longer fictions, one after the other. The body of her short stories tends to be neglected, except as quarry for the longer works. In contributing to a revaluation of Woolf's achievement, I take up these stories to discover what is distinctive in their form and, by implication, their innovations within the development of the modern short story. . . .

From the inception of critical discussion of the short story, the theory of its form has not moved much beyond Poe's notion of the unity of effect to be realized in a genre of limited means. While problems of subject (plot or no plot?), theme (point or no point?), and narrative (telescoping . . . exposition . . . development) still persist, the question of form has never approached resolution. The usual byway down which this trail leads is epiphany; since the most prominent of modern stories come accompanied by the theory of epiphany, it was inevitable that Joyce's term has been used in lieu of a concept of form. A recent study of epiphany recognizes the laxity of such usage; despite Joyce's emphasis on the suddenness of the epiphanic moment, "it has been fashionable to speak of one or another of his entire works as 'an' epiphany . . . If an epiphany is 'sudden,' as it is, then works as long as the average short story—and certainly any novel— simply cannot 'be' epiphanies, for they cannot be 'experienced' or apprehended immediately." The story, short or long, is not a single event but a form extended in time and, conceptually, in space as well.

If short stories are not unitary events but extended forms, they involve sequences of phenomena, verbal or representational. Morris Beja's defi- nitions of epiphany are useful in defining story form, for he goes on to discriminate another frequent element of short fiction, the leitmotif. In the epiphany, Beja writes,

[T]here has to be some such revelation—and it is here that we must beware a common misconception that confuses Joyce's epiphany with the leitmotif, the obsessive image which keeps coming back into the consciousness of a character or into the work as a whole but which at no single time involves any special, sudden illumination.

This apt distinction between a series of repetitions and a salient event unfortunately avoids stating a possible relationship between the two: the epiphany may appear at the end of a sequence, either as a term that stands outside the "obsessive" chain and suddenly emerges to cap it, or as the final and crowning instance of the repetition itself —that is, either a new motif, like the coin of success and betrayal in Joyce's "Two Gallants," or a definitive statement of an established one, as in the protagonist's return to isolation in his "A Painful Case."

In this way, one can better appreciate the repetitiveness that appears so widely in modern literature—witness Pound, Eliot, Faulkner, Proust— but nowhere more strikingly than in the short story. What Frank O'Connor somewhat facetiously calls Hemingway's "elegant repetition" (on the model of "elegant variation") may be only a mannered extension of the repetitive patterns that mark the stories of Joyce, Mansfield, and Woolf. . . .

Virginia Woolf's short stories can be broadly divided into those that are formally linear and those that are formally circular. Another word on terminology here: the adjectives "linear" and "circular" are obviously metaphoric and, just as obviously, spatial. The use of these terms implies no exclusive disposition toward "spatial form" in Woolf: one might just as easily use the terms "progressive" and "returning," though these would emphasize the ongoing temporal flow of the narrative. *Linear* or *progressive* forms are those that start at one place or time or motif or verbal cluster and move through a number of others, arriving at a place, time, motif, or verbal cluster distinct from those with which they begin; while *circular* or *returning* forms are those which begin and end with the same or similar elements. . . .

A related group of stories takes a form similar to this gradual expansion or emergent creation, but in such a group there is no single term which moves through a sequence. Instead, a *series* of items is set out, the final item emerging as the key one. The most famous instance of such an organization is the well-known "Kew Gardens," in which eight beings or kinds of being are observed as they saunter through the botanical gardens. First comes the general class: "men and women." There follow a married couple remembering the past; a snail (who appears three times in all); a mystical and somewhat disturbed old man and his younger companion; "two elderly women of the lower middle class," looking for their tea; a young couple, also thinking of tea amid the glow of their romance; a group of aerial beings, including a thrush, butterflies, and an airplane; and finally, the voices. After lulling us with what seems a random and casual series of passers-by, the story reaches a new level of intensity at its final paragraph:

It seemed as if all gross and heavy bodies had sunk down in the heat motionless and lay huddled upon the ground, but their voices went wavering from them as if they were flames lolling from the thick waxen bodies of candles. Voices. Yes, voices. Wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with such depth of contentment, such passion of desire, or, in the voices of children, such freshness of surprise; breaking the silence? But there was no silence; all the time the motor omnibuses were turning their wheels and changing their gear; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air.

This crescendo of the repeated word "voices" emerges as the final and triumphant term in the series of elements presented by the story. The voices are, indeed, a chorus of all the beings who have trooped through Kew Gardens, those named and all the others that might have been listed—come at last to expression and united in a common life. It is difficult to distinguish form and content in this beautiful piece; even the simplest description of the form verges on an interpretation of the content, and I must content

myself on this occasion with singling out the linear progression by which "Kew Gardens" reaches its heights at the close.

Source: Avrom Fleishman, "Forms of the Woolfian Short Story," in *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman, University of California Press, 1980, pp. 44-70.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the four different groups of people who stroll through Kew Gardens. Do you see any similarities among them? How do Eleanor and Trissie compare? How do Simon and the young man compare with Trissie?

Why is so much attention paid to a snail walking across the garden floor?

What is unique about this story? Can you formulate a plot? What is the story trying to do by skipping around from group to group and why doesn't the story tell the reader more about what happens to each of its characters?

Analyze in detail the scene of Trissie and the young man standing by the flower bed. What does the umbrella symbolize? What does the two-shilling piece in the young man's pocket symbolize? Why does Woolf expect the reader to figure out the details?

After meandering through the garden, several of the people decide to go have their tea. Why? What are the literal reasons and what are some possible figurative interpretations?

Compare and Contrast

1915: There are 4,300,330 visitors to Kew Gardens. In 1916, the number falls to 713,922 after the institution of an entrance fee.

1990s: About one million people visit Kew Gardens annually.

1918: The fourth Reform Act increases the electorate from eight to twenty-one million. The Reform Act gives all men over the age of twentyone the right to vote, while women over thirty are granted voting rights. In the United States, women's suffrage is guaranteed by the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1920. In 1928, all men and women over twenty-one who meet the residency requirement are entitled to vote.

1990s: All men and women eighteen and older can vote in England and the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

Dubliners (1914), by James Joyce, includes short pieces that shed light on different people living in Dublin. Many stories focus on seemingly ordinary experiences that the characters struggle ineffectively to idealize. Joyce challenges his reader to read subtle cues to understand the implications of his characters' observations.

The Garden Party and Other Stories (1922), by Katherine Mansfield, includes stories that utilize varied tones to illustrate people in their daily lives. Sketching the different impressions and perspectives of family members or solitary characters, Mansfield's prose can be fresh, stark, and haunting.

Jacob's Room (1922), by Virginia Woolf, tells the story of Jacob Flanders who, like Woolf's beloved older brother, Thoby, died as a young man. Jacob is killed in World War I and the story is told through the perspective of those who interact with Jacob as family, friends, lovers, or mere acquaintances. Like "Kew Gardens," the novel employs innovative writing techniques.

To the Lighthouse (1927), by Virginia Woolf, tells the story of the Ramsay family's yearly retreat to their summer house. Mr. Ramsay is a philosopher and Mrs. Ramsay is a mother devoted to her children. The novel records the dynamics of family life and the touching effects of time's passage on human relationships. Like *Jacob's Room*, the novel employs innovative techniques and a network of subtle details.

Further Study

Gillespie, Diane Filby, *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*, Syracuse University Press, 1988.

This work examines the relationship of Virginia Woolf to her sister Vanessa Bell. Bell was an artist who collaborated with Woolf in illustrating her stories and providing frontispieces for some of her novels. Gillespie discusses how "Kew Gardens" became an important collaborative project between the two sisters.

Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, Knopf, 1997.

This highly readable biography traces the life of Woolf not only as an author, a feminist, and a public figure but also as a private person.

Woolf, Virginia, *Moments of Being*, edited by Jean Schulkind, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

This is a collection of Woolf's autobiographical essays. Not published in her lifetime, they lend insight on her childhood and relationships with her family, her fight with depression, and her decision to marry Leonard Woolf.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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