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Natalia Green

Brigham Young University, natalialyngreen@gmail.com

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Natalia Green

Dr. Watts

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Apples and Orchards, Exteriority and Interiority: An Examination of the Agency of Objects in
“In the Orchard”

“In the Orchard” is a short story written by Virginia Woolf and published in the *Criterion* in April 1923. The *Criterion* was a journal that focused on publishing high-brow literature; it contained works from authors such as T.S. Eliot (who also edited the journal), George Saintsbury, and, of course, Virginia Woolf. Eliot created the *Criterion* with the purpose of publishing writing that contained the unconventional practices seen in modernist writing. Banerjee notes this motive when he states, “He [Eliot] also believed that it was through the journalistic channel that he could promote the kind of revolutionary poetry that he and friends like Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Wyndham Lewis were writing” (234). Thus, the *Criterion* was a journal which sought to publish literature that was both high-brow and promoted modernist writing practices. “In the Orchard” meets both of these requirements.

“In the Orchard” would fit well with Eliot’s criteria, not only because of the quality of writing generally associated with Virginia Woolf, but also due to its advancement of modernist writing practices such as a complex examination of interiority. “In the Orchard” is divided into three sections, and each section focuses on a woman named Miranda napping in an orchard and the objects around her, as well as the influence of these exterior objects on Miranda’s interior thought processes and actions. Woolf’s “In the Orchard” advances modernist writing practices

by portraying exterior objects as agents with the ability to influence characters' interior thoughts and exterior actions through the example of Miranda, who either recognizes the influence of objects as she acknowledges unfair societal conventions or fails to be influenced by her surrounding objects.

Before I begin analyzing "In the Orchard," I'll provide some information about the general writing practices seen in modernism and Woolf's own writing practices. Virginia Woolf was considered one of the most influential authors within the modernist movement, and many of her works exemplify common patterns of modernist writing. I would argue that one of the most common patterns from modernist writing seen in "In the Orchard" is the influence of external forces on internal thoughts. The relationship between exterior objects and interior thought processes was heavily examined in modernism because, as Williams notes, "Freud's discovery [gave writers] a view of the primacy of the subconscious or unconscious ... as well as a radical questioning of the processes of representation" (49). Thus, new discoveries on the human mind prompted modernist writers to explore the complicated human thought process in their works.

Virginia Woolf centers some of her work around this examination of exterior objects influencing internal thoughts. This exploration is shown by her short story "Solid Objects," in which material objects like a piece of glass found at the beach gain the power to direct John's life more than he himself directs it (n.p.), "A Haunted House," in which a house communicates with a character, telling the character that he or she is, "'Safe, safe, safe,'" (n.p.), and "The Mark on the Wall" in which a mark on a wall prompts a character to think on subjects such as the pleasantness of wood or the meaning of life itself (n.p.). This exploration of the ability of objects to influence characters in Woolf's work exemplifies the ability of objects to act as agents by guiding characters' thoughts and actions.

Objects can guide characters in Woolf's work through a slow afternoon, or they can drive the character to completely change their life goals. John from "Solid Objects" is an example of the latter effect. In "Solid Objects," Mao notes that John is acted upon by the objects he collects, and becomes "the servant of some inspiration, psychosis, or muse— one who accepts a calling of sorts, whether for better or for worse and whether that calling be noble, ridiculous, or both" (40). This suggests a sort of quest as John searches after these objects, as he becomes, as Mao phrases it, their "servant" (40). The objects guide him on a different path of life, and, while his friend Charles might mourn his failed career, John doesn't seem to regret his wasted opportunity with politics. Indeed, Woolf shows John to be more passionate about this quest than he was about his political career (n.p.). Thus, in the story objects act upon John, and their influence is beneficial to John since they provide him with a pursuit he is more passionate about than his political career. This story shows that Woolf clearly believes that objects have agency as they communicate with, and shape the actions and thoughts of, characters, and that this communication between objects and characters can be beneficial for the character.

"In the Orchard" then continues this practice of examining the beneficial interaction between external settings and interior thought processes and actions with Miranda. In the case of "In the Orchard", objects have the ability to potentially influence Miranda due to the symbolism Woolf gives them, a symbolism which represents the need for Miranda to defy societal conventions. Gordon notes of Woolf's writing practices, "'The Victorians had trusted language to say just what they meant; the moderns found this impossible, and therefore communicated through symbols—the lighthouse or the waves—which require a reciprocal effort on the part of the reader. Virginia Woolf therefore gave fiction the depth of poetry" (n.p.). "In the Orchard" contains the symbolic objects characteristic of Woolf's work.

The first example of these symbolic objects is the book mentioned at the beginning of the short story. When “In the Orchard” is digitally analyzed using Voyant, the Links tool shows that the words “book” and “fallen”, are linked because of their proximity to each other (Sinclair n.p.). The book is commonly thought to symbolize knowledge, which means that, by reading a book, Miranda is seeking knowledge, while in an orchard, surrounded by apples. The parallel to Eve in the Garden of Eden is strong here because Adam and Eve fell from the Garden of Eden after partaking of the tree of **knowledge** of good and evil (The Bible, Gen. 3.1-24). Hence, the link between the terms “book” and “fallen” within the context of the story (a woman, partaking of knowledge by reading a book surrounded by apples in an orchard) provides further evidence that, in this case, the book is symbolic of the fall of Adam and Eve and the consequences for women that this fall has entailed throughout history.

The symbolism of this book then becomes more significant when its impact on Miranda is seen. Dao notes Woolf’s belief in the importance of objects such as books to influence actions when he notes that Woolf once stated about choosing a book to read in the morning, “We want something that has been shaped and clarified, cut to catch the light, hard as a gem or rock with the seal of human experience in it, and yet sheltering as in a clear gem the flame which burns now so high and sinks now so low in our own hearts” (36-37). Here, Woolf seems to argue that the object of the book itself, not even the words inside of it, have the power to influence a subject as they guide humanity in their actions simply due to their material form. This process of a book guiding actions is seen in “In the Orchard” as well when Miranda is unconsciously influenced by a book. The text notes this influence in the second section of the short story, “Miranda slept in the orchard— or perhaps she was not asleep, for her lips moved very slightly as if they were saying, ‘Ce pays est vraiment un des coins du monde...où le rire des filles...éclate... éclate...

éclate” (244). Earlier in the story, this is revealed to be part of the text when the narrator notes, “[Miranda’s] book had fallen into the grass, and her finger still seemed to point at the sentence, ‘Ce pays est vraiment un des coins du monde où le rire des filles éclate le mieux’” (243). When translated to English, this text reads “This country is really one of the corners of the world where girls’ laughter breaks out best.” Although at first the action of mouthing words might appear to be an exterior action rather than an example of an interior thought process, the fact that Miranda is sleeping when this occurs makes it a sub-conscious action which reflects an unconscious thought process. Thus, the object of the book influences Miranda’s unconscious, internal thought processes by prompting her to mouth the words from the book in her sleeping state.

The element of the book that really impacts Miranda’s train of thought is the text she murmurs, which prompts her towards a recognition of unfair societal conventions. The English translation of this section of the book (“This country is really one of the corners of the world where girls’ laughter breaks out best.”) at first appears to prompt Miranda towards the confirmation that she lives in a world where women are happy. However, it’s difficult to argue that the book is used to reassure Miranda of the happiness of women, rather than ironically comparing this idealization to Miranda’s reality, given its strong association with Eve and the Fall that is shown through the digital analysis of the text I mention above. In addition, the thoughts Miranda proceeds to have due to the influence of external objects associated with the church show the ways in which symbolic objects are influencing Miranda to create negative associations with societal conventions that oppress women rather than positive ones.

The next object that creates a negative association with a societal convention for Miranda is an “organ in the church playing one of Hymns Ancient and Modern” (243). This organ is noted in the first section of the story with the line, “Then the very topmost leave of the apple-

tree... chimed with a pensive and lugubrious note. It was the organ in the church playing one of Hymns Ancient and Modern” (243). The effect of the organ music is that it makes Miranda reflect back on her wedding day, as is shown by her recollection, “Naturally she was being married when the organ played the tune from Hymns Ancient and Modern” (244). Here, the organ music that is mentioned in the first section of the story impacts Miranda to return her thoughts to her wedding day. This memory then spirals outward into grander reflections on society, and, particularly, the church, with the next objects that act upon Miranda.

The next objects I’d like to discuss are church bells. Of these bells, Miranda notes, “when the bells rang after the six poor women had been churched, the sullen intermittent thud made her think that the very earth shook with the hoofs of the horse that was galloping towards her... and it seemed to her that everything had already begun moving, crying, riding, flying round her, across her, towards her in a pattern” (245). In order for the way the bells impacted Miranda’s thought process in this section to be understood, I’ll provide some historical context for the practice of churching women. The sounds of the bells cause Miranda to think of “six **poor** women [who] had been churched” (245, emphasis added). Cressy describes the process of churching women as “a religious ritual required of women after childbirth” which usually consisted of a suggested “sequestration” from society and then “thanksgiving for the mother’s deliverance” (1-114). Though there is some debate as to whether or not the practice was harmful or beneficial for women, it’s undeniable that it historically had elements which were cruel towards women. For example, it was sometimes biased towards unwed mothers, which Cressy notes when he states, “Elizabethan bishops commonly threatened to deny bastard bearers their thanksgiving, as a form of punishment, until they had named the father and performed proper penance” (131-132). Thus, even if women wanted to take part in the ceremony, it had a dark side which could be used to

control women. Miranda clearly recognizes this dark side as she describes the women as “poor” after the bells make her reflect on the churching of women in her community (245). Thus, here, the church bells influence Miranda as they lead her to reflect on an unfair societal convention.

Though this examination of the impact of objects on Miranda’s train of thought is important to the advancement of modernist writing practices, perhaps the element of the story that exemplifies a modernist writing pattern even more is the way objects fail to influence her internal thought process. One of the most symbolic external objects in the story is the wind. When the word “wind” is examined with the Trends tool in Voyant, it has more total occurrences in the story than the words “bells” or “book” and it occurs more frequently than these other two terms towards the end of the short story (Sinclair). Nevertheless, despite this more frequent occurrence, the way it impacts Miranda’s thought process is never shown. Woolf first describes the wind in the story when she notes, “The wind had changed. Above everything else it droned... miles above Miranda lying in the orchard asleep. It swept on, eyeless, brainless, meeting nothing that could stand against it, until, wheeling the other way, it turned south again. Miles below...Miranda stood upright and cried aloud: ““Oh, I shall be late for tea!”” (244). This description is the most in-depth examination of the wind in the three sections of the story, yet it doesn’t observe Miranda’s thought process. In spite of the frequent mention of the wind in the story, both this section and the following sections mark a notable absence of interaction between Miranda and the wind.

This absence of interaction between the wind and Miranda is next described in the second section. Here, the wind interacts with another object, “Miles up in the air the wind changed; the golden feather of the church tower squeaked; and Miranda jumped up and cried: ‘Oh I shall be late for tea!’” (245). This interaction between the wind and an object, probably a weathervane on

top of the church, rouses Miranda from her nap, but there is still a notable lack of interaction between her interior thought processes and the wind.

The reason for Woolf choosing to portray a lack of interaction between Miranda and the wind could be explained by the way the wind is portrayed in the final section. The final time the wind is described is in the third section, when it is noted as a force that disrupts the balance of the orchard, “There were twenty-four apple-trees in the orchard, some slanting slightly, others growing straight with a rush up the trunk which spread wide into branches and formed into round red or yellow drops. Each apple-tree had sufficient space. The sky exactly fitted the leaves. When the breeze blew, the line of boughs against the wall slanted slightly and then returned” (245). Here, the changing wind is shown as a force of chaos, at least for a moment; it disrupts the carefully constructed balance of the orchard and threatens to interrupt a long-established pattern. In this way, I would argue that the wind is symbolic of the changing times often grappled with in the modern era, particularly the push for greater rights for women, and Miranda’s failure to interact with it in the same way she interacts with similar symbolic objects in the story shows a refusal to acknowledge the object.

The parallels between the wind and its symbolism of the improving times for women can be seen at the end of “In the Orchard”. Women had only gained the right to vote in 1918, and “In the Orchard” was published a few years after this triumph in 1923. Aside from gaining the vote, other changes for women could be seen at this time as a result of World War I, when more women entered the work force and some even served within the war effort as ambulance drivers. The winds were indeed changing for women. This changing wind symbolizes the changes for women one more time at the very end of the story, “The wind changing, one bunch of apples was tossed so high that it blotted out two cows in the meadow (‘oh, I shall be late for tea!’ cried

Miranda), and the apples hung straight across the wall again” (245). Here, the movements of the wind mentioned in the first section of the story, “The wind had changed...It swept on...until, wheeling the other way, it turned south again” (244), are seen once more as they begin to disrupt the pattern of the orchard, but then change direction. The wind begins to change, Miranda decides to obey societal conventions once she is again conscious by bowing to practices such as teatime, and the wind’s direction is reversed, returning the apple orchard to its normal state rather than disrupting the balance seen there. Miranda is not internally impacted by this symbolic exterior object.

While it may seem difficult to translate this examination of the wind’s changing patterns as an examination of the impact of exterior objects on interior thought processes, the failure of the wind to prompt Miranda’s internal thoughts is significant due to the context of modernist goals at the time. At this time, Woolf was encouraging women to be active, rather than passive, about fighting for greater rights within their society while also encouraging people to recognize the importance of their surrounding objects and be influenced by them.

Around the time when “In the Orchard” was written in 1923, modernists were motivated to encourage society to recognize the importance of objects. Mao contextualizes the modernist era when he notes the concern that began in the first decade of the twentieth century with the “obsessive consumption” of the rich; this concern resulted in a society that prioritized production over consumption, which meant artists needed to justify the importance of their work as an object to “justify the artist’s activity as a part of society’s total work” (32-40). Mao then notes that modernists were eager to encourage society “to treat the work as a solid thing...to justify art’s place in a society apparently unsympathetic to the idea of beauty as its own end but deeply committed to production as moral imperative” (40). Thus, Woolf felt a strong need for women to

use their agency both to act for their own advancement in society and for society to recognize the importance and agency of objects within their lives. Miranda fails to do both of these things when she follows society's conventions and fails to recognize the significance of objects such as the wind.

Woolf and the other modernists were therefore motivated to examine not only what made characters, and people in general, active in their acknowledgement of objects, but also what made them passive. Thus, "In the Orchard" is a significant contribution to the period of modernist literature and its patterns because, through its examination of the impact of exterior objects on internal thought processes and actions, it examines the reactions of an ordinary person to her changing world and her abilities and failures to recognize, and be influenced by, objects in that new world.

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