

## Woolf (4)

### NARRATIVE AND SOCIETY

- 5.1 Narratives are also made out of social conventions: they both *use* and *represent* them. More generally, the meanings of texts are social through and through.
- 5.2 The most surprising and meaningful engagements with social convention often happen when those conventions are *just* made visible but do not rise to narrative centrality.
  - 5.2.1 One way (not the only way) to discover the social bearings of a text is to read for the traces of what has been excluded.
  - 5.3 Oppositions in narrative texts, which may occur at many levels of theme and form, may often be related to *social* oppositions.
  - 5.3.1 The relation between narrative oppositions and social ones is a matter for investigation. Social contradictions, as with other materials of narrative, are transformed: they may be revealed, distorted, simplified, complicated, resolved, or otherwise remade by the devices of narrative.
  - 5.3.2 Endings are to be interpreted in the context of an *expectation* that they will resolve fundamental oppositions, though they often don't, or do so misleadingly. Endings, like beginnings, are important but not determinative.
- 5.4 In fictional narrative, *realism* is a literary mode, used in a variegated family of fictional (especially novelistic) genres. It has been the novelistic norm since about 1750.
  - 5.4.1 Realism's conventions include: few or no improbable events, no supernatural interventions, "ordinary" (prototypically, middle-class) rather than heroic or noble protagonists, the possibility of seriousness alongside comedy, and denotative reference to particularized details of everyday life rather than allegorical reference.
  - 5.4.2 None of these characteristics are necessary or sufficient conditions for realism, which is a loose, historical category.

On or about December 1910 human character changed....All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.

Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth, 1924), 4–5.

I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her — you may not know what I mean by the *Angel in the House*. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure....I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing....It was an experience that was bound to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the *Angel in the House* was part of the occupation of a woman writer.

Woolf, “Professions for Women” (1931), in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1941), 236–38.

#### FICTION AND HISTORY

- 6.1 Fiction’s relationship to time, and hence to history, is mediated through the three layers of narrative.
- 6.2 Fiction participates in the construction of history—with its own conventions.
- 6.2.1 Whether and how fictions can be said to tell historical truths is a matter for investigation into every component, and every convention, of each fiction.
- 6.3 Narrative fiction has a distinctive history of its own, part of the history of literature, of the arts, or of culture.
  - 6.3.1 The history of artistic forms and styles is part (not all) of this history.
  - 6.3.2 Literary history is in the shadow of social and political history.
  - 6.3.2.1 The late nineteenth and early twentieth century set the terms of these problems for us, because the idea of art’s *autonomy* became a central preoccupation of writers and artists seeking to make a mark.