

Modernist Fiction and the Appeal of Literary Characters:

Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

Kari Helen Fjeld



A Thesis Presented to the Department of Literature,
Area Studies and European Languages
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the MA
Degree in English Literature (ENG4790)

Supervisor: Rebecca Scherr

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

Spring 2012

Modernist Fiction and the Appeal of Literary Characters:

Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

Kari Helen Fjeld

A Thesis Presented to the Department of Literature,
Area Studies and European Languages
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the MA
Degree in English Literature (ENG4790)

Supervisor: Rebecca Scherr

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

Spring 2012

© Kari Helen Fjeld

2012

Modernist Fiction and the Appeal of Literary Characters: Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Kari Helen Fjeld

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Print: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

IV

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the question of what qualities of fictional characters middlebrow readers find compelling. It will be claimed that modernist novelists were less skilled in character creation than were their predecessors, at least in terms of appealing to the middlebrow reader. Reasons for this will be suggested through studies of theories on the appeal of literary characters, as well as theories on plot and narration. The main work examined will be Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* – one of the most modernist of modernist novels. That Woolf should fail to create characters compelling to the middlebrow reader is paradoxical, as she herself was highly concerned with characterization, as well as with appealing to the reader she referred to as the “common” reader. Although Woolf had several opinions on how one should go about writing novels with characters as the primary focus, she seems to have failed to follow her own prescriptions fully when writing *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf's opinions as expressed in her essays “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Modern Fiction” will be compared to the situation in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Moreover, it will be claimed that Woolf somewhat failed to realize what the “common” reader is looking for in a novel, something that could have been avoided had she paid more heed to the features of the popular “classics” she repeatedly referred to. One of the main claims here is that modernist novelists often were inconsistent in their claimed “art for art's sake” approach, often letting realism and social criticism get in the way of “art.” In the case of Woolf – and other modernist novelists with her – realism, social criticism, and other concerns extraneous to characterization seems to have interfered with the rendering of character for character's sake. One of the implications of such a study is the suggestion that contemporary novelists may take advantage of hindsight and compare characterization in novels considered modernist to characterization in novels considered more classical and traditional in attempting to decipher more about the art of character creation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Rebecca Scherr for all of her help throughout the process of writing this thesis. Her knowledge and guidance have been invaluable, and her courses highly inspirational.

Contents

ABSTRACT	V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
CONTENT	VIII
1.0 INTRODUCTION	1
2.0 MODERNISM AND FICTION	6
3.0 THEORIES ON THE APPEAL OF LITERARY CHARACTERS	12
4.0 CHARACTERIZATION IN <i>MRS. DALLOWAY</i>	20
4.1 Alienation and inadequate communication.....	20
4.2 The Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis and mind reading.....	22
4.3 Gossip and the social context	27
4.4 Moral and values	29
4.5 Complexity and reality.....	31
4.6 Pessimism, passivity, and reluctance to change.....	34
5.0 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NARRATIVE STYLE AND PLOT TO THE APPEAL OF CHARACTER	38
5.1 Narrative style	38
5.2 Plot	44
6.0 CONCLUSION	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	60

1 Introduction

She was dressed in rich materials – satins, and lace, and silks – all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands [...].¹

As peculiar as Miss Havisham from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* is portrayed above, she has enjoyed a long-lasting fame, along with the novel's protagonist Pip and the various other rather idiosyncratic characters he encounters on his way. This year of 2012, 200 years after Dickens' birth, a new BBC TV adaptation of *Great Expectations* has been produced, along with a number of other programs and events in celebration of his authorship. The question of why his novels have earned the kind of fame that they have is an interesting one, perhaps above all interesting to writers, or would-be writers. Set in a time long gone and a society alien to most of us, it may seem incomprehensible that people continue to read and cherish Dickens' novels, that they continue to inspire writers and dramatizers, and that they are still prominent on university syllabi worldwide. What is it that fascinates us in such old-fashioned accounts of characters and events so remote from our own realities? This thesis will examine theories on what it is that makes characters compelling, one of the main purposes being to show that writers of modernist fiction generally were less skilled in character creation than were their predecessors. It will be claimed that modernist writers in large part failed to appeal to the average novel reader – that is, the group of reader considered “middlebrow.” Possible reasons for this will be suggested through examinations of theories on the appeal of characters – as well as through examinations of theories on plot and narration – which will be continuously applied to examine the situation in *Mrs. Dalloway*, one of the most modernist of modernist novels. *Mrs. Dalloway* is particularly conducive in illustrating the possible effects of the experimentation on part of the modernists, as Woolf in this novel employed a number of radical changes to the previous conventions of novel writing. She introduced features that came to be employed by other novelists and later considered properties of the current of modernism. Moreover, Woolf's essays and unpublished writings from the time prior to and during the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* show that she was very much concerned with conventions of the novel and character creation in particular, and it is

¹ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg, (NY: Norton & Company, Inc. 1999), p. 50

interesting to compare the opinions she expressed in her writings to how they were – or were not – manifested in *Mrs. Dalloway*. It will be claimed here that although Woolf had some promising opinions on how to go about the conveying of character, she somewhat failed to follow her own directions in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and, moreover, that it may be that not all of her opinions were favorable to character.

The result of the high degree of experimentation and new thinking on Woolf's part may have been an alienation of the "common" reader and instead an appeal to literary critics and other academics – a group of readers whose main interests tend to lay with different aspects of a novel than characterization. And there are certainly aspects of *Mrs. Dalloway* that deserve attention and praise. For example, Woolf's ingenious way of using irony, allegories, and other skilful methods of conveying social criticism and feminist commentary, her at the time bold challenging of established religion and values, as well as her innovative narrative techniques are features in this work that continue to impress critics. However, interestingly, indications that Woolf was not aiming to write for the highly educated and literary professionals are abundant. Jane de Gay, who wrote *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past*, a book in which she aims to prove that Woolf's novels are highly influenced by the literary past – an issue we will come back to – points out that Woolf, in her unpublished manuscript "Byron & Mr. Briggs" (1922) "attacks the way in which literary critics seek to act as intermediaries between text and reader, and champions the common reader [...]." ² Moreover, in the book *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe* Nicola Luckhurst points to Susan Stanford Friedman, who referred to "Woolf's mistrust of what happens when reading becomes the reception of professional scholarship [...]," ³ claiming that "screening her uncommonness behind the mask of the 'common reader', Woolf anchored her oppositional consciousness in the position of the outsider, including preeminently, being outside the academy [...]." ⁴ Furthermore, in Woolf's essay "Modern Fiction" (1925) she makes frequent references to the "common" reader, and in "Mr. Bennett and Mr. Brown" (1923) – an essay in which Woolf shares her opinions on how to go about creating convincing characters – one gets the impression that she wishes to appeal to as many novel readers as possible. Woolf's opinions on character creation and appeal to the reader will be examined in the following, as well as those of other theorists on fiction and character creation.

² Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 6

³ Susan Stanford Freeman referred to in Nicola Luckhurst, "Introduction" in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 2

⁴ *ibid.*

Professor Anker Gemzøe of Aalborg University brings attention to the possible problems experienced by readers of modernist fiction: “The lack of apparent unity, the overwhelming complexity, multi-dimensionality and heterogeneity of the kinds of modern prose [...] presupposes another kind of reading, places hitherto unknown demands on the reader.”⁵ Such demands had not traditionally been placed on the average novel reader, who generally belonged to a different audience than that for which “highbrow” literature had been directed. The *Norton Anthology: English Literature* points to a phenomenon that took place in the late nineteenth century, namely the “rapid emergence of a mass literate population, at whom a new mass-produced popular literature and cheap journalism [...] were directed.”⁶ Consequently, the novel was often regarded as inferior to other art forms, and the *Norton Anthology* suggests that “[t]he audience for literature split up into ‘highbrows’, ‘middlebrows’, and ‘lowbrows’.”⁷ These are classifications that also literary critic Suzanne Keen employs, and in her book *Empathy and the Novel*, she points to the contemporary tendency of regarding best-selling novels with wide public appeal as “lowbrow” literature (often romance novels read mainly by women), other popular books “middlebrow” (e. g. books distributed by book clubs), whereas works that sell fewer copies, but to readers considered more educated, are seen as “highbrow.”⁸ This latter category would probably appeal to many modernist writers and artists, with their “art for art’s sake” approach. However, as we have seen, Woolf seems to have wished to appeal to the “common” reader, and it is reasonable to assume – based on Woolf writings, as suggested above – that what Woolf referred to as the “common” reader is what we today would consider the “middlebrow” reader.

Woolf has clear opinions on what to focus on in order to engage her readers. She says in “Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”: “I believe that all novels [...] deal with character, and that it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel [...] has been evolved.”⁹ This focus on character should be conducive in appealing to the “common” reader, for if we shall believe Keen, “[...]”

⁵ Anker Gemzøe, “Modernism, Narrativity and Bakhtinian Theory” in *Modernism* vol. 1, ed. by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), p. 131

⁶ Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, “The Twentieth Century and After” in *The Norton Anthology: English Literature eighth edition* vol. 2, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 1827

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 102-103

⁹ Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown” in *Collected Essays* vol. 1, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1966), p. 4

character identification [...] remains the single most important facet of response to fiction articulated by middlebrow readers.”¹⁰ Woolf was not the only modernist fiction writer concerned with character – writers of modernist novels in general tended to be highly focused on this matter. The complexity of characters was focused on like never before in novels where most of the action took place inside the characters’ minds, and it is paradoxical, then, that by focusing so insistently on character, the characters should become less compelling to the average reader. Woolf says in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” that “[t]he writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes[...],”¹¹ something that it will be claimed here that Woolf – as well as other modernist novelists with her – in large part failed to fully accomplish. One of the main reasons for this – it will be claimed here – is the focus on character’s consciousness over acts. For not only were novel readers used to reading stories rather than renderings of characters’ thoughts and feelings, but the subjects whose consciousnesses were depicted by the modernists often seemed unfamiliar and strange to the reader. This was in large part due to the upheaval and rapid change that took place on many levels at the time, producing in the novelists a desire to express the strangeness and unfamiliarity they found themselves experiencing.

One of the implications of such a study is the notion that contemporary novelists may take advantage of hindsight and compare modernist novels to those more classical and traditional in attempting to decipher more about the art of character creation. Modernist writers often had several agendas when writing novels; some focused above all on the artistic value of fiction, most wanted to break with the past, and some – like Woolf – were concerned with conveying social criticism. The latter had also been true with many of their predecessors, but it seems that they were often more successful than the modernists in creating convincing characters at the same time. In the case of the modernists – and Woolf in particular – the second agenda of social criticism seems often to have been counterproductive for creating appealing characters that are interesting in themselves. There were simply too much distraction and focus on other aspects. The same seems to be true for techniques that were probably meant to create less distance between character and reader, but that may have contributed to a feeling of alienation on part of the reader.

¹⁰ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel.*, p. 60

¹¹ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 8

The thesis will begin with some explanations of the features of modernist fiction, followed by an examination of theories on how and why literary characters fascinate readers – including Woolf’s opinions in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Modern Fiction,” as well as those of more recent theorists. Then we will look more specifically at *Mrs. Dalloway*, applying the theories to get an impression of the situation in this novel. Finally, the possible importance of plot and narration with regards to character will be examined.

2 Modernism and fiction

“In making any survey, even the freest and loosest, of modern fiction, it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old,”¹² stated Virginia Woolf in her essay “Modern Fiction.” As suggested above, this should perhaps not be taken for granted at all, at least not when we consider the art of character creation. It seems that the reformation of the features of the novel in many cases should come to do characters a disfavor – perhaps especially the rethinking of plot, narration, and the role of the author – issues that will be examined below. First, we shall look at some of the characteristics of modernist fiction compared to those of its predecessors.

The modernist novel was obviously quite different from the Victorian, the Romantic, or any of its predecessors in several respects. Some characteristics of modernist novels are fragmentation, complexity, polyphony, free indirect style, lack of a coherent plot, inconclusiveness, and – very often – a pervasive pessimism. In the words of Edward Mozejko: “In a most general way it can be said that in modernism, the world is perceived as being problematic, that is, while posing epistemological questions, the artist does not provide any valid answers as to how to solve or remedy them.”¹³ This is very much the case in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The *Norton Anthology*’s chapter on “The Twentieth Century and After” poses another possible problem of modernist fiction, namely that of alienation:

The roots of modern literature are in the late nineteenth century. The aesthetic movement, with its insistence on “art for art’s sake,” assaulted middle-class assumptions about the nature and function of art. Rejecting Victorian notions of the artist’s moral and educational duties, aestheticism helped widen the breach between writers and the general public, resulting in the ‘alienation’ of the modern artist from society.”¹⁴

Thus, we may deduce from this that there probably existed a wider gap between modernist fiction-writers and their readers than had been the case with earlier writers, and that authors neither felt a need to moralize in their novels, nor make a point to educate the public and consequently set guidelines for behavior. Whereas certain Victorians may have asked the

¹² Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction” in *The Norton Anthology: English Literature eight edition* vol. 2, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 2087

¹³ Edward Mozejko, “Tracing the Modernist Paradigm” in *Modernism* vol. 1, ed. by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), p. 28

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, “The Twentieth Century and After” in *The Norton Anthology: English Literature eight edition* vol. 2, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 1827

question of what was then left to do in a novel, we – modern as we are – may find this promising and look forward to reading candid interpretations of rebellious characters and their debauched lifestyles. Modernist writers certainly produced such stories, but do not forget to mind the abovementioned gap: if the authors are alien, chances are that their characters are, too. Not only are they alien because their creators insisted on their own uniqueness; they are also often depicted as aliens in a disrupted post-war society. Added to this is the pessimism of the authors; the inability or reluctance to suggest acceptable solutions to their characters' problems, and an often too explicit need to criticize or lament circumstances. Furthermore, we have the desire to change old conventions of writing, rejecting for example the traditional notion of plot with beginnings, middles, ends as well as the reluctance to introduce clearly defined heroes and villains. Keeping in mind that most readers of the time had experienced unprecedented turmoil, tragedies and instability, it is possible that they did not wish to see the same features in literature, at least not when reading for recreation. T. S. Eliot, for example, as referred to in the *Norton Anthology*, longed for “the still point of the turning world.”¹⁵ Whereas previously literary characters may have provided such stability, with their often clearly defined place in society, accepted, mainstream opinions, and often implications to the reader for how one should conduct one's life, modernist characters seemed to be victims of unfavorable circumstances with an undefined role in the world. Novel readers accustomed to works by authors who took it upon themselves to educate, offer solutions to moral questions, and provide characters who live happily ever after may have found the reading of modernist novels a somewhat frustrating experience.

Gemzøe has written an essay named *Modernism, Narrativity and Bakhtinian Theory* where he points to several phenomena in modernist narratives. Two of those are particularly relevant to this thesis: one is that of modernism and realism, the other is the problem of the author. Let us start with the former, the suggested problem of the relationship between modernism and realism. It may seem strange that realism should represent a problem in a current where “art for art's sake” was highly esteemed, but – as we shall see in the examination of *Mrs. Dalloway* below – realism and reality often had a prominent place in modernist novels. Gemzøe opens with an interesting description of modernist fiction:

In prose fiction modernism may be characterized as some kind of reaction against the conventions of realist narrative. This reaction can be more or less radical, ranging from the

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot referred to in Greenblatt and Abrams, “The Twentieth...”, p. 1829

partial dismissal of certain devices to the complete rejection of the exciting, entertaining plot, the interesting character, the recognizable environment [...].¹⁶

He goes on to state that this reaction has taken two complementary directions, namely that of the rejection of narrative in favor of realism, and that of the rejection of realism in favor of narrative. What he means by this is that in the former tendency authors did aim to render modern reality, but in a different way than authors of the realist narrative, who were thought to fail in their attempt to present reality by introducing stereotypes, linear development and improbable plots. Realist narrators were thought to see themselves as sovereign, telling rather than showing. Modernist writers, Gemzøe holds, showed reality through “scenes, dialogues and related devices such as interior monologues.”¹⁷ The latter tendency – narrative in favor of realism – involves a continuation of the grotesque tradition by introducing “eccentricities and alternative worlds”¹⁸ to the psychological and social realism found in nineteenth-century novels. A claim in this thesis is that *Mrs. Dalloway* seems to be a “victim” of the former tendency, in which traditional narrative suffers at the expense of realism. Woolf was highly concerned with “catching life,”¹⁹ with rendering life as it is as perceived by the mind rather than describing the external, something which came to expression both in “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” She criticized her predecessors for their “enormous labor of proving the solidity, the likeness to life,” urging writers to “[l]ook within”²⁰ in order to find the real truth – improbable to the reader or not. However, in *Mrs. Dalloway* she has managed to convey a respectable amount of social criticism, and in this way stayed true to realism. One of the consequences of this realism was a pervasive pessimism permeating the novel, an issue we will return to later.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s extensive work on the novel and the author, Gemzøe highlights some of the possible problems posed by the role of the author, as well as that of the reader, in modernist works of fiction. He points to Bakhtin’s long-held idea of the relationship between author and hero: “the main idea is that the author should be able to round off, complete, ‘consummate’ the hero and thereby create a character.”²¹ The author is likened to an almighty God with total control over the passive character, and “[t]he loving finalization of

¹⁶ Gemzøe, “Modernism, Narrativity ...,” p. 125

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Woolf, “Modern Fiction”, p. 2089

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Gemzøe, “Modernism, Narrativity...,” p. 127

the hero – this is the opportunity and duty of the author-ity.”²² Modernist fiction, with its lack of convincing heroes and largely undefined characters contributed to Bakhtin’s recognition that “authorial authority is in crisis.”²³ However, Gemzøe describes a “Copernican revolution” in Bakhtin, suggesting that he came to have a more positive view on modernist works, partially as a result of contemplating Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels – novels that contain features now considered modernist. Nevertheless, this led Bakhtin to be unsure of what position the author now should assume for himself:

It is now a decisive quality of the author that he does not seek to limit and finalize, and a decisive quality of the hero is that he does not allow himself to be objectivized. The hero is characterized by an all-consuming self-awareness, incompleteness, open and indefinite. Precisely this change of dominance in the presentation of the character requires a new authorial position.²⁴

Interestingly, this uncertainty around how to conduct oneself as an author of fiction is reiterated by Woolf. In her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” we find the famous quote: “in or about December, 1910, human character changed.”²⁵ It is with this point of departure that Woolf aims to show that as human relationships have changed, so must consequently literature; writers must stop trying to use the old Edwardian and Victorian conventions when writing fiction. She urges a shift in the focus on property, social position and historical facts to a much greater focus on character – primarily the inner life of character, as mentioned above. As we shall see, she expresses several thoughts and guidelines on the matter in this essay, but she seems to have had some trouble positioning herself as an author when writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as finding the right focus. If we again look to “Modern Fiction,” she says of the author: “[...] if the writer were a free man [...] if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style [...]”²⁶ This suggests that Woolf is of the opinion that a work of fiction should come down to the *feelings* of the author rather than conveying a story as we know it, in a style that readers are familiar with and with familiar and captivating themes. Bakhtin too recognized – as suggested in the quote above – that the hero had come to gain more contemplative qualities, but he is still referred to as “the hero.” The concept of hero is one of the conventions Woolf seems to reject, seemingly suggesting that the purpose of the

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128

²⁵ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 319

²⁶ Woolf, “Modern fiction,” p. 2089

novel is mainly to depict life as experienced by characters instead of acts, personal qualities and relationships:

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. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?²⁷

The answer to this question may be no; that the main purpose of the novel is not to be true to the inner life and consciousness of the author – or character –, that this is not what most readers are looking for in a novel. She said of the novelists seeking to preserve a “likeness to life” in their writing that this is “labour thrown away,”²⁸ and one may question why she should think that labor to provide a likeness to *inner* life should not be equally wasted. It is hard to find reasons to believe that the position the author should assume for himself is one in which he is a provider of often incoherent thoughts and feelings regarding how he experiences life and reality, rather than the more traditional position in which the author tells a story with characters and their acts being the main focus. Even if modernist novelist should come to be more interested in the former, it is unlikely that middlebrow readers should share the author’s opinions. Woolf says further in “Modern Fiction,” regarding the author: “He has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer ‘this’ but ‘that’: out of ‘that alone he must construct his work. For the moderns ‘that’, the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology.”²⁹ The gap between writer and reader that seemed to widen following the Victorian era was alluded to above, and that the middlebrow reader should not be interested in “the dark places of psychology” is perhaps not a presumptuous assumption. When Woolf says of that which resides in the dark places of psychology that it is “difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors,”³⁰ it is reasonable to assume that writing based upon this should be incomprehensible and thus alienating to the middlebrow or “common” reader as well. Modernist writers seemed to struggle on several levels; from the troubles of coming to grips with changes in society and the human mind to the complicated task of finding the appropriate tools to render the new reality in a convincing way acceptable to readers. Unfortunately, their characters seem to have been somewhat neglected in the process, contributing to a situation in which they may seem rather alien to the common

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2089

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 2091

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 2091

reader, consequently making their stories less interesting to readers who are unable to identify with the protagonists and their thoughts and predicaments. What is it, then, about character that is likely to capture and convince the middlebrow reader? We will now move on to look at some theories on this matter.

3 Theories on the appeal of literary characters

Literary critics Suzanne Keen and Blakey Vermeule both have interesting theories in their respective books, *Empathy and the Novel* and *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* Vermeule points to the need we all seem to have for gossip, and holds that “[f]ictional characters reflect the importance of what we care about,”³¹ as they often struggle with the same issues that real-life characters do. She sees fictional characters as not very different from celebrities – they are characters we will never meet, but whose lives we take an interest in.³² Moreover, she suggests: “the reasons that we care about literary characters are finally not much different from the question of why we care about other people [...]”³³ She holds that it is a question of how our minds have evolved – we are wired to care about others, and she seems to suggest that since our minds are of “ancient stock,”³⁴ we willingly go along when we are presented with human-like entities, real or not. Fiction writers as well as other artists, journalists, and other media workers have tools to keep our attention, she claims, and they all “exploit our need to indulge in gossip.”³⁵ On the advantage literary characters have over for example celebrities as presented by the media, she says: “They harvest not the bright leaves but the dark roots of our desire for social information, often delving deeper than any other medium. They swim in the deep end. And this gives them special claims on us.”³⁶ And there is no doubt that renderings of fictional characters provide a far more complete description of a person (however fictional) than other media; where can you get a more candid and complete account of what goes on in the mind of another being – as well as on the outside – than in a novel? Because a novel features fictional characters, we probably tend to believe that we are being told the unpainted truth (the truth of course also being a fictional one, but nevertheless a product of a real person’s mind), featuring all the sordid details and socially unacceptable thoughts. We probably tend to assume that the characters – or the narrator – have nothing to hide from us. After all, why would they? It is not like they run the risk of running into us on

³¹ Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. xii

³² *ibid.*, p. xiii

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. xiv

the street only to be met with our condescending judgment and disapproval. As E. M. Forster says, as referred to by Keen: “[...] fiction [allows] readers to ‘know people perfectly,’ for fictional characters are ‘people whose secret lives are visible’.”³⁷

This distance between reader and a fictional story is alluded to by Keen, who says: “My own research suggests that readers’ perception of a text’s fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion.”³⁸ What she means by this is that since fictional stories do not demand any action on the reader’s part – nothing is at stake, the reader will not be judged on his or her response to the reading situation – the mechanisms we have in place for protecting our social image, as it were, may be dismissed. Empathy for others is easier when we do not have to worry about defending our public persona. This view is supported by Vermeule, who suggests that our craving for gossip makes us inclined to be fascinated by literature: “[i]ndeed, there is something rather chaste about getting our dose of gossip through fiction: what better way to indulge in gossip than to hear about the doings of people we have no relationship to?”³⁹ She then moves on to quote Patricia Spacks on her feelings regarding reading Horace Walpole’s letters: “[h]e also provides us with a relatively ‘cost-free’ outlet for feelings we might find unacceptable in other contexts [...]”⁴⁰ Thus, reading fiction may be a way of immersing oneself in the complicated lives of others, allowing one to part-take in emotional experiences without any of the consequences that go with similar experiences in real-life.

The above quote by Vermeule indicates an interesting difference between her and Keen when it comes to the question of why we care about literary characters: Keen is largely concerned with *empathy* as a property of novel reading, rather than gossip and *Schadenfreude*, phenomena weighted by Vermeule. Keen focuses on the role of empathy in the context of reading novels with one of the main purposes being to explore the possible benefits of an interdisciplinary cooperation between what she calls “literature specialists”⁴¹ and psychologists and researchers on developmental and social psychology.⁴² She points to a study showing that “hearing a description of an absent other’s actions lights up mirror neuron

³⁷ E. M. Forster referred to in Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 58

³⁸ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. xiii

³⁹ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 164

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. xii

⁴² Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. xi

areas of fMRI imaging of the human brain.”⁴³ This supports Vermeule’s claim that we are predisposed to care: if we readily empathize, it is likely that we also care. Interestingly, suggesting a possibly different explanation to why people read fiction than the one offered by Vermeule, Keen says:

[...] middlebrow readers tend to value novels offering opportunities for strong character identification. They report feeling both empathy with and sympathy for fictional characters. They believe that novel reading opens their minds to experiences, dilemmas, time periods, places and situations that would otherwise be closed to them.⁴⁴

However, this suggestion could also be seen as complementary to and elaborating on Vermeule’s theory: we may crave gossip, and hearing about the predicaments of others places us in a situation where we are able to think “I know how she must feel; I’m so glad that it is not me this time.” Thus, we both empathize and – sometimes – sympathize while satisfying our need for gossip; empathy and sympathy are perhaps even key to *why* we lust after gossip. That we should desire gossip about characters with whom we can at least partially identify – or wish to identify with – is only logical. Keen, however, seems to somewhat contradict her above claim by suggesting that we may readily empathize with almost anybody: “[e]mpathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization.”⁴⁵ This is perhaps plausible if we consider the example of the mirror neurons above, where little was needed to activate areas of the brain where empathy takes place. Interestingly for this study, this may imply that the supposed alien world of the modernist subject – both the author and the literary character – should not be a significant impediment to reader’s empathy.

If we are indeed – as Vermeule thinks – less inclined to be absorbed by some characters and very fascinated by others, the question of who is fascinating becomes an interesting one. This is something with which Vermeule is highly concerned, and she has – albeit admitting she cannot offer an exact answer – a possible “simple answer,” namely the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis. This phenomenon, she claims, is “the reason that we are driven to try to make sense of other people at all.”⁴⁶ This theory proposes that the reason why human beings are so cognitively advanced compared to other primates is due to the complexities of our social lives. Rather than the “survival of the fittest” situation experienced

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. viii

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 69

⁴⁶ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 30

by other species in other environments, primates – above all humans – depend on the navigation of a social system as well. Vermeule refers to the MIT *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* when she points out that factors which make primate societies so complex include “the formation of sometimes fluid and shifting alliances and coalitions,”⁴⁷ which leads us to be manipulative and deceptive. The term *Machiavellian* focuses on the role of cunning, Vermeule explains, and – although it may be misleading, we may not deserve the above labels – “Machiavellianism makes for good stories.”⁴⁸ She uses Milton and Wordsworth as examples when she explains that Satan – perhaps the most famous deceiving, Machiavellian manipulator of all times – is “one of the most fascinating characters in English literature.”⁴⁹ If we consider some of the most popular books we have read, it may be hard to remember one that did *not* include at least one highly Machiavellian character – often the villain of the story who makes the hero look even better. As Vermeule points out, “the more openly Machiavellian you are, the less chance you have of actually turning out to be the hero of the story.”⁵⁰ But why are we fascinated by such evil creatures? Because we have to, says Vermeule. On the most basic level, we need to be able to predict who will do us good and who might harm us. In Vermeule’s words, “[w]e scan other people because we have to cooperate with them and compete against them.”⁵¹ And how do we know who is on our side and who is not? According to Vermeule: by using our capacity for mind reading.⁵² That is, we try to figure out what the people around us think, how they think, how they might feel about different things, what they may be likely to do next, and so on. In short, we attribute certain features to the people around us, hence our abovementioned craving for gossip. This type of social information is decisive to us; it is perhaps not hard to believe that the propensity to read minds – fictional or not – is so deeply embedded in us that we do it automatically when we are given “minimal elements of identity.”⁵³ Considering the quantity of mind reading we engage in every day to protect our interests, it is perhaps logical that this activity should interest us when it comes to fictional characters as well. If we have evolved to be highly concerned with the doings and motivations of others, it is likely that this should be an activity we readily engage in, and even enjoy. As mentioned above, fiction-reading is risk-free and

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 30

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 31

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 32

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 33

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 34

⁵³ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 69

non-binding, and we may readily allow ourselves to imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes – to empathize. This could even come to serve a purpose in real life. By learning about somebody else's situation, his or her responses to it and how everything turned out in the end, we may be prepared for a similar situation in our own lives. Vermeule calls this “strategy testing” and refers to philosopher Greg Currie's comments on Keen's writings on narrative empathy: he suggests that both empathy and strategy testing are means towards mind reading.⁵⁴ Thus, we have all the more reason to believe that we are profoundly – perhaps even innately – inclined to use those skills whenever we have the opportunity, and that this may help explain our fascination with characters; whether it be our neighbors, movie stars, or the creations of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. In such a view, one might make the assumption that the literary characters that fascinate us are those whose lives contain elements that are fairly similar to those of our own lives. Although social and economic conditions have changed throughout time, our personal goals and desires may not have changed that much – we may still somewhat identify with characters of for example Victorian literature.

Vermeule's theory on the role of Machiavellianism when it comes to people's interest in fictional characters also underpins her claim that we are driven to read literature because we crave gossip: gossip is social information by which we often conduct our lives. We need to know what is going on around us to make sense of our own lives and plan our actions. She says: “[t]he gossip market thrives because it gives people what they want – access to fame, beauty, youth, money – and to make it all go down more smoothly, heaping doses of Schadenfreude.”⁵⁵ *Schadenfreude*, she says, is “an emotion rather crudely concerned with keeping one's self-regard intact in the face of the world's onslaught [...]”⁵⁶ This makes sense as most of us like to think that our conduct is the right one while we are constantly faced with people who allow themselves to behave in ways that either directly harm us or we find immoral. They may do this for personal gain at the expense of the codes of the social system, for which we like to see negative consequences so as not to feel foolish because we make sacrifices to comply with the codes, often at the expense of personal comfort. In short, we enjoy witnessing the downfall of the high and mighty; we like it when bad things happen to bad people, and when good people get their revenge. Vermeule points to the popularity of

⁵⁴ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 40-41

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 7

such stories in literature – stories she calls “wheel-of-fortune stories.”⁵⁷ Although Vermeule calls novels featuring such stories “spectacular failures” and opines that novelists should leave such accounts to the “chauvinist press,”⁵⁸ she recognizes that they have a wide appeal: “cognitive psychology is beginning to suggest [that] they are old and familiar because they are just the sorts of stories humans tell because they stimulate deep features of our social brains.”⁵⁹ One explanation of why this is so may be that in our complex social systems we tend to make sure we act in ways beneficial to our social survival, in part by not breaking social codes. Violators of written and unwritten rules compromise our smooth navigation of the system, and we thus feel threatened. We want to see such violators punished; that is the only way balance may be restored. As Vermeule states: “[c]rimes are more interesting than diseases because a crime is somebody’s violation of the social contract.”⁶⁰ Interestingly, Woolf touches upon this in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” when she points to the Edwardian’s interest in disease: “[...] for I knew that if I began describing the cancer and the calico, my Mrs. Brown [...] would have been dulled and tarnished and vanished forever.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she has chosen to render mental illness as well as the ills of society.

In addition to the claim in Keen’s quote above that the reader need not identify with the characters to feel empathy is the suggestion that the characters need not be “complex or realistic.” To start with the latter, it is interesting to again look at Woolf’s opinions in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” On the credibility of character, Woolf says in response to Mr. Arnold Bennett’s claim that the novel will be forgotten if the characters are not “real and convincing”: “But, I ask myself, what is reality? [...] A character may be real to Mr. Bennett and quite unreal to me [...] There is nothing that people differ about more than the reality of characters, especially in contemporary books.”⁶² The late 19th century and the early 20th was, as has been alluded to, a time in which people’s reality tended to change in several respects, and different people experienced different changes, both externally and internally. Consequently, what is reality to Woolf may not be the same to Mr. Arnold Bennett. However, Woolf goes on to say: “[b]ut if you take a larger view I think that Mr. Bennett is perfectly

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 5

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 6

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 74

⁶¹ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 8

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 4

right.”⁶³ She then points to some of the greatest novels in history, claiming: “if you think of these books, you do at once think of some character who seemed to you so real (I do not by that mean so lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes [...]”⁶⁴ The distinction between “real” and “lifelike,” then, becomes key to understanding Woolf’s view on the novel and characters, and we examined her thoughts on that matter above, as she expressed them in “Modern Fiction.” Here it is made clear that the reality to be sought by novelists is – in Woolf’s opinion – inward contemplation rather than external experience. Authors seeking an “air of probability”⁶⁵ to their works are rejected. Thus, she seems to disagree with Keen’s suggestion that readers tend to look for strong character identification in novels – to recognize the characters as probable human beings in the real, external world. Reality, as depicted by novelists of the time, very often consisted in renderings of the external lives of the social elite – that is, their lives as perceived by people externally. Not only is such a reality not real to most people; it is not even real to the characters whose lives are rendered. What Woolf calls for is a new way of portraying reality – one that shows what life is *really* like on the inside rather than what it appears to be. It is no wonder that such a rendering should not seem “lifelike,” as – like she mentioned in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” – reality is different for every individual. And here lies a potential problem posed by Woolf’s advocating of inwardness: the author’s inner life – or that of the character – may have absolutely nothing to do with that of the reader – nor be interesting to the reader, no matter how well-rendered this is. Woolf may have succeeded in making the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* seem real, but the things we see through the characters’ eyes may fail to fascinate us. Moreover, when reading a novel, the middlebrow reader may not be looking for an elaborate account of the thoughts and feelings of characters; he may actually want to – at least to a certain degree – be *told*, as well as *showed*. Both may be necessary as facilitators for mind reading. If Vermeule’s theories on the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis and mind-reading as decisive to the understanding of why we read fiction hold true, a certain degree of telling may be presupposed. We may need the narrating voice to explain to us aspects such as the relationship between people, relevant background information that it would be unnatural for the characters to possess, as well as opinions on characters’ actions. A showing of the still-picture kind suggested by “catching life” may not be conducive to mind reading, an exercise middlebrow readers may look for above anything

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 4

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 5

⁶⁵ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” p. 2089

else in novels, consciously or not. There is a possibility that Woolf failed to realize what purpose a novel should serve to the “common” reader. Definitions of what really defines a novel have always been debated partially due to the fact that it developed based on several other forms, such as articles and plays, and Woolf may thus have felt free to reject her predecessors’ notions on the matter. However, the novel most likely continued to develop in response to readers’ desires – those of *common* readers, as these were the ones to which the novel tended to appeal to – something which Woolf may have failed to fully pay heed to.

Not entirely clear what sort of requirements a literary character has to fulfill to be considered complex, let us suppose that complexity in the context of the fictional character entails a certain resemblance to a real human being, rather than a stereotypical representation. Vermeule distinguishes between “flat” and “round” characters. Flat characters are those who do not change much throughout the novel, or, in Vermeule’s words, “[i]f you are a flat character, you have no inner life.”⁶⁶ Flat characters are often used by authors as foils to the main characters, and are often representations of stereotypes. “Flat characters are allegorical,”⁶⁷ says Vermeule, and they often represent some idea or quality.”⁶⁸ Round characters, on the other hand, are “open and complex, much more like real human beings in their inconsistency.”⁶⁹ One might be tempted, then, to wonder if Keen might have been wrong when claiming that characters need not be complex to invoke our empathy, or to be compelling. After all, who is convinced by the evil witch and the innocent, blond-haired damsel after they are past the stage of children’s literature? One would think that readers only slightly more mature would want something more nuanced. Both Woolf and Vermeule seem to appreciate a certain complexity, but Vermeule writes: “[f]lat characters may not be realistic, but they can be compelling.”⁷⁰ However, she stresses the importance of round characters with whom the flat ones can interact; she has no example of successful novels featuring only flat characters. As mentioned above, flat characters are often representations of evil, and one might wonder how fascinating they would be without their round counterparts. As Woolf claimed in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, characters are more complex than their social status and the houses they live in, and it is the novelist’s job to convey this.

⁶⁶ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 82

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83

4. Characterization in *Mrs. Dalloway*

“I want to criticize the social system, and to show it at work at its most intense”⁷¹ was a statement made by Virginia Woolf regarding her purpose of writing *Mrs. Dalloway*. This is a vision that does not fit neatly into the image of the modernist writer, but, as Alex Zwerdling points out, “Virginia Woolf was [...] a satirist and social critic as well as a visionary, and this element in her fiction is nowhere given more complete expression than in *Mrs. Dalloway*.”⁷² As we have seen, Woolf also concerned herself very much with character; in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” she clearly expresses her opinions on how one should go about the depiction of character in a changed world. However, in the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*, it seems that she had some trouble following her own prescriptions. In addition, some of her ideas may have been less than conducive for character, as alluded to above.

4.1 Alienation and inadequate communication

Having criticized the Edwardians for being too concerned with what is outside of character, Woolf certainly made sure she got inside of hers – the chosen style of narration in this novel is free indirect discourse, allowing for ample information about the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Nevertheless, this technique did not prevent Woolf from dealing with issues on the outside. Not only are the characters concerned with them, or victimized by them, but she has also set up a group of characters that is conducive to the conveying of social criticism as they are contrasted. The characters – often representatives of society’s ills, some claim, such as the attitudes and concerns of the upper class (e.g. Clarissa), repressive power (e. g. Sir Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes), and victims of poor government decisions (e. g. Septimus) – are thus in a way played up against each other, but mainly only as seen from the *outside* of the action, as interaction between them is limited. Through free indirect discourse we are given access to the characters’ thoughts, and it is largely by listening in on these that such feelings of isolation and alienation are conveyed. This technique is one of the ways in which Woolf criticizes British post-war society; the most powerful expression being Septimus’ destructive thoughts, hallucinations, and eventual suicide as a result of post-war trauma. This alienation, as well as the need the main characters – Clarissa and Septimus – have for solitude and

⁷¹ Woolf cited in Alex Zwerdling: *Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System* in PMLA, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Modern Language Association, 1977), p. 69. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461415> [Accessed 29 April 2011]

⁷² Zwerdling, *Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System*, p. 69

contemplation contributes to a situation in which the characters do not interact so much with other characters as had been the norm in novels of previous times. Most of the action – if one might call it so – takes place *within* the characters rather than being played out in public as a result of interaction with other characters. This results in a situation in which the reader is largely isolated inside the characters' minds – an unusual situation for readers of novels following the classical conventions criticized by Woolf.

This lack of communication in *Mrs. Dalloway* may be seen as a flaw, even if Woolf may have seen this as an effective way of making a point. In part by using the techniques chosen, Woolf seems to have run the risk of causing a lack of communication between herself and the reader as well as between her characters, quite the contrary of what she aimed to do if we consider her quote in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown": "[b]oth in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between [...] the writer and his unknown reader [...]."⁷³ That the characters themselves are experiencing sensations of isolation and alienation from society further contributes to the negative effects of such an approach. That Woolf should choose to limit the interaction between characters to such an extent is perhaps a surprising decision for someone who "seem[ed] to be fascinated by the fact that a human being's distinctness only reveals itself through contact with other people [...]."⁷⁴ as Jeremy Hawthorn points out. Readers may see the distinctiveness of the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* as we have access to them all, but since this is not the case for the characters themselves – they have very limited access to each other – they do not seem to develop their personalities much as a response to contact with others. This, in turn, results in a rather static situation without many twists and turns, so common in other novels. The fact that the novel only describes one single day is of course another unfortunate factor in terms of character development and plot development, issues we will return to below.

As Hawthorn further suggests regarding Clarissa: "In cutting herself off from Peter, we feel that she may have cut herself off from a necessary contact with others."⁷⁵ This seems to be true not only for the relationship between Clarissa and Peter. There is a detachment between Clarissa and her husband, between Clarissa and the other ladies in her upper class society, between Septimus and his wife, between Septimus and the rest of society, and so it

⁷³ Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," p. 8

⁷⁴ Jeremy Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway: A Study in Alienation* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975), p. 12

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13

goes on. The novel is largely concerned with Clarissa's party – an attempt to bring people together; to communicate. However, communication is exactly what the novel is largely deprived of. Woolf was herself concerned with what she referred to as “[t]he screen-making habit,”⁷⁶ suggesting that “[i]f we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies we might perhaps dissolve utterly [...] But the screens are in excess; not the sympathy.”⁷⁷ One might wonder, then, if *Mrs. Dalloway* is not a novel criticizing the “screen-making habit,” praising Clarissa for her healthy attempt to communicate, as opposed to Septimus' fatal attempt.

Hawthorn also points to the Woolf's quote in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” alluded to above, regarding the relationship between the author and the reader: “Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other.”⁷⁸ He says: “[...] the use of the party metaphor in the essay [...] suggests that she is aware of important parallels between her problems of communicating as a writer, and her characters' problems of communicating as people.”⁷⁹ One might wonder, then, if the party in *Mrs. Dalloway* is an expression of communication problems on several levels. Is Clarissa an expression of the author – perhaps of Woolf herself – trying to communicate but not quite succeeding? If this is the case, the communication problems experienced by the writer could be seen as one theme of the novel. One might question, then, what Woolf's primary objective was; especially when keeping in mind her statement regarding the purpose of *Mrs. Dalloway* quoted above. If the characters in this novel are merely tools to the means of other objectives, one can perhaps not expect to “catch the phantom,”⁸⁰ as Woolf calls the successful rendering of character in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.”

4.2 The Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis and mind reading

When we examined Vermeule's views on the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis above, we saw that – in her opinion – “Machiavellianism makes for good stories.” In a novel where the only potential villains in sight are the British Empire and its government officials, and potential heroes are trapped inside their own angst-ridden or regretting minds, the stage is not

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 21

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 8

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 18

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 1

exactly set for dramatic and intriguing interaction between good and bad. As Zwerdling rightly puts it when commenting on how *Mrs. Dalloway* examines the “governing class” from the inside: “The very use of internal monologue is a form of sympathy, if not of exoneration. To know everything may not be to pardon everything, but it makes it impossible to judge simply and divide the world into heroes and villains.”⁸¹ For in *Mrs. Dalloway* it is difficult to decide who to sympathize with and who not to sympathize with. There is not one character whose objective is to harm another for personal gain, so common in Machiavellian and “wheel-of-fortune” narratives, and not one character that stands out as a “hero.” What we learn from witnessing what goes on in the characters’ minds is that while these characters are rather preoccupied with themselves, they do not seem to rely heavily on others to improve their lives. They have little interest in infringing upon others to achieve their personal goals. In the case of Clarissa, she lives fairly complacently in her rather eventless marriage to Richard, having resigned herself to the fact that “[i]t was all over for her;”⁸² taking pleasure in reminiscing about the past, throwing parties, and contemplating the beauty of objects. It is as if she – at the age of 52 – has come to terms with her life having come to the stage where everything has been said and done, more or less; her life is in its final phase. Tellingly, at her party, she says: “Odd, incredible; she had never been so happy [...] No pleasure could equal [...] this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living [...]”⁸³ Thus, there is a feeling of accomplishment, and a lack of motivation to carry on; nothing prompts her to achieve much more. This also holds true for Peter, who, when he talks about how he has grown old, says that “one doesn’t want people after fifty.”⁸⁴ He even says:

Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it, here, this instant now, in the sun, in Regent’s Park, was enough [...] now that one had acquired the power, the full flavor; to extract every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning; which both were so much more solid than they used to be, so much less personal.⁸⁵

Here we have a character that seems to have found some “deeper meaning,” a meaning that is not even personal, but yet enough. Is there then anything more to be desired? When characters claim to be so comfortable in their own circumstances, it may be difficult to make anyone interested in reading about them. As Keen says, “empathetic response to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states, whether or not a match in details

⁸¹ Zwerdling, *Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System*, p. 70

⁸² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 40

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 157

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 68

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 67

of experience exists,”⁸⁶ something which is of course very much in line with the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis. Moreover, when the happiness of the characters is no longer personal, they consequently no longer want much from others; they do not look for other people to make them happy, nor is there any desire for revenge. This may be detrimental to the middlebrow reader’s interest in the story, as he his interests tend to lie with matters on a more personal, cotidian level rather than with the “bigger” questions. And as William Flesch suggests: “Our interest in narratives will [...] always depend on our emotional recognition of motive [...] among characters.”⁸⁷ This is certainly in line with Vermeule’s theory of the importance of mind reading to the novel: if there is no motivation, it is futile to attempt finding out what the characters’ motivations are and let oneself be absorbed in the activity of mind reading. One cannot help but think that one has arrived at the scene too late when reading *Mrs. Dalloway* – the action is over; here is nothing more to be seen.

As mentioned above, Vermeule relates the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis to mind reading. She states: “if Machiavellian intelligence is the answer to why we are driven to make sense of other people, mind reading is the tool we use to put those abilities into play.”⁸⁸ We saw that mind reading, in short, involves attributing certain features to people and, in turn, predicting how they may feel about things and what they may be inclined to do next. This, Vermeule suggests, is an ability human beings (and possibly other primates) have evolved more or less as a strategy of survival. The question of *how* we mind read could be central to our understanding of why we take interest in literary characters, and Vermeule presents two theories on the matter. The first she calls “theory of mind,” a theory holding that we all have a built-in inference system that help us “represent to ourselves the beliefs, intentions, and desires of other people.”⁸⁹ It is a question of being able to “recognize second-order intentionality,”⁹⁰ the purpose largely being to obtain social information that may be useful to us when navigating the outside world.⁹¹ This, in turn, she relates to Machiavellian intelligence, as this phenomenon relies on our ability to “understand pretense in others.”⁹² In the “theory of mind” view, it seems that Machiavellian intelligence could be seen as a built-in

⁸⁶ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 72

⁸⁷ Flesch, William cited in Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 163

⁸⁸ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, pp. 34-35

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 35

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 37

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p.36

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 39

feature of the human mind, as “children as young as nine to fourteen months can pretend.”⁹³ The implication of this to fiction-reading could be that because we are inclined to take an interest in human intentionality, reading fiction is a way of testing our proposed “built-in system.” Just as we like it when the outside world makes sense – when we are able to understand the actions of other people – we are probably inclined to enjoy it when the fictional world makes sense to us as well. We may then enjoy a feeling of balance - the feeling of equilibrium suggested above when fictional characters are being punished for their wrong deeds. Reading fiction is a way of running “our inference systems in a decoupled mode,”⁹⁴ and it is perhaps not surprising that engaging in a fictional story that activates our inference systems should not be much less compelling than when it runs in the real world. After all, Machiavellian intelligence is about *representing* others; our ideas may or may not be true, even if the people whose minds we represent to ourselves are real. In the real world we do not always find out whether our inferences – our representations of others – were accurate, but in a novel we are usually eventually presented with “the correct answer.” If this theory holds true, a novel such as *Mrs. Dalloway* is perhaps bound to fall short because the minds we are presented with are so very little Machiavellian – they do not prompt us to try to make sense of them. They are predictable, and they have “nothing going on” in relation to others, as alluded to above. We do not need social information from them, because their social personas have so little impact on characters with whom we may sympathize. As Vermeule says when talking about agency and person: “the concept of person is incomplete without immersing it in a wider social world.”⁹⁵ This social world should not be too wide, however, as it is the interaction between characters and social information about them that are interesting to mind reading, not information regarding society at large. Modernist writers tended to be preoccupied with issues that went beyond the personal level, something which may have made their novels less palatable to the middlebrow reader of fiction. Modernist writers seemed to have brought too much politics, social criticism, and history into their works – focuses that may have gotten in the way of rendering interesting characters. This shortcoming is ironic when being a property of writers adhering to a current in which the notion of “art for art’s sake” was placed above all else. That an author like Woolf, who was so very concerned with the “common” reader and character for character’s sake, should choose this path is even more paradoxical.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 38

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 23

The other theory of how we mind-read is simulation theory, which was referred to above as “strategy testing.” This, Vermeule claims, is the most promising of the two theories with regards to fiction-reading. In explaining this theory, she engages with Keen’s theory of mirror neurons and empathy, suggesting that when we witness the actions of others, mirror neurons are activated, allowing us to empathize.⁹⁶ That is, we “take the whole reasoning system ‘offline’,”⁹⁷ allowing us to mentally simulate the actions of others with no risk on our own part, closely related to the suggestions above regarding the appeal of fiction being due to the low cost involved. In such a view, rather than having an internalized theory about the minds of others, we take as our point of departure our own minds and imagine ourselves in the shoes of the subject whose mind we attempt to read. Particularly interesting to the activity of reading literature are philosopher Greg Currie’s thoughts on the matter, as explained by Vermeule:

The imagination is crucial to our understanding of the world. Suppose you want to assess how risky it would be to do some action. You could undertake to do it, but that would mean incurring all the costs (and risks). Instead, you could run an internal simulator, which would be a practical substitute. [...] the simulator would allow you to experience [...] what the course of action would be like.⁹⁸

Thus, fiction may serve as a vehicle by which we can imagine *ourselves* in any number of scenarios, through the actions of fictional others. Whereas in the theory of mind one might question the salience of social information gained from fiction reading as it is unlikely to have any bearing upon the reader’s own life, simulation theory could be a more plausible alternative as an explanation to why some are fascinated by fictional characters. If we again look to *Mrs. Dalloway* we may be hard pressed to find scenarios that would invoke the reader’s interest in strategy testing. This, in turn, is probably closely related to the lack of a captivating plot (an issue we will return to below), as well as the difficulty he may have in identifying with the lives of the characters. As the main characters are rather peculiar – a suicidal war-hero and an upper class, introverted housewife – their actions (or the lack thereof) may have limited appeal. Their doings may be unlikely to stimulate the middlebrow reader’s curiosity – he may not be too inclined to take an interest in what goes on at a high-society London dinner party, nor in how one might go about killing oneself.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 40

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 39

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 40

4.3 Gossip and the social context

As noted above, Vermeule suggests that gossip and *Schadenfreude* are properties that drive our mind reading, and that fiction is a great arena in which to put our mind reading into practice. She says: “I believe that fiction evolved throughout the 18th century to give people ever more intense doses of ‘this singular experience’ – the mind reading experience.”⁹⁹ If we are to believe that readers’ interest in characters of the fictional world in large part hinges on the social information they provide, the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* may fail to captivate. Surely, the amount of social information in this novel is abundant on the level of *society* and political conditions, but, as claimed above, this is not information interesting to the Machiavellian intelligence. What is primarily interesting to this are concerns that have to do with the social context – with the people with whom we interact. As Vermeule says, “the information we care about comes packaged in human form.”¹⁰⁰ For gossip to be interesting, we must take an interest in the people with whom it is concerned, something which – as suggested above – may prove challenging in *Mrs. Dalloway*. One of the reasons why it seems so hard to get involved in the lives of the characters in this novel may be that we do not really recognize them, an issue also touched upon above. Keen suggests that we need minimal elements of identity in order to empathize. That we do not recognize the characters is not to say that we need to identify with them in order to take an interest in them, but rather that we need to understand their personalities and motivations in relation to other characters in their environment. Elaborating on her claim that “[...] the concept of person is incomplete without immersing it in a wider social world,”¹⁰¹ Vermeule presents an explanation by Leslie Brothers:

[T]here is another dimension to the concept ‘person’ – a person always belongs in a network of persons, a network that has been termed the ‘social order.’ The social order is intrinsically moral, for it is made up of shoulds and oughts, triumph and shame, villains and heroes.¹⁰²

Now, Clarissa Dalloway is certainly a part of a wider social world, as seen from the outside, but there is a lack of other characters to whom she is significant. As long as her existence does not seem to have any significant bearing upon the lives of others, social information about her becomes rather irrelevant. When Hawthorn talks about the problem of communication in *Mrs. Dalloway*, he points to the recurring question in the novel of “to

⁹⁹ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 14

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 27

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 23

¹⁰² *ibid.*

whom?” He holds that this is an expression of Woolf’s perceived problems of communication and human alienation,¹⁰³ and although this may be a productive way of making a point, it also inevitably results in a situation in which the flow of social information is both stifled and becomes less relevant. “From whence is our information coming, for whom – if anyone – is it intended?”¹⁰⁴ asks Hawthorn. This question of “to whom” is repeatedly asked by Clarissa, who, tellingly, when talking about the meaning of life says that she feels it a “waste” and a “pity”¹⁰⁵ that people should not be brought together, something which she intends to rectify with her parties. “[...] it was an offering,”¹⁰⁶ she says about her act of bringing people together, “but to whom?”¹⁰⁷ Thus, Clarissa feels that she is doing something meaningful and praiseworthy, but she is not sure for whom she does the favor. Nevertheless, she continues to do it, suggesting that it may be “[a]n offering for the sake of offering.”¹⁰⁸ In such a situation where the significance of the acts and the information available are so undefined, and the beneficiaries are not identified, it becomes difficult to engage in mind reading and thus in enjoying gossip, as the question of “to whom?” and “from whom?” makes the information rather meaningless. Hawthorn speaks of “knowledge without relationships”¹⁰⁹ in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and it is this – although perhaps unique and praiseworthy, as Hawthorn seems to opine – which may be the most discouraging to the gossip-craving, Machiavellian reader. The fact that the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* often are perceived as stereotypical representations of social ills further weakens their case, and may make them less compelling. Even Clarissa has been seen as less than a character in and by herself: Zwerdling points to A. D. Moody’s suggestion that “Clarissa is not an individualized character at all, but merely an embodiment of society’s code, an ‘animated mirror’ of the shallow world she reflects.”¹¹⁰ Modernist writers seemed to be far more concerned with the “big questions” than had been the case earlier; issues on the personal level such as romance, marriage, rivalry and other gossip-fomenting preoccupations may have appeared rather banal in a time when one had been reminded so emphatically of the frailty of life itself. One may compare this situation with what Vermeule refers to as “the ‘new’ or ‘reformed’ novel.”¹¹¹ These were early novels that

¹⁰³ Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway...*, p. 26

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 27

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 103

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway...*, p. 27

¹¹⁰ A. D. Moody referred to in Zwerdling, *Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System*, p. 79

¹¹¹ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 169

were intended to distance themselves from the “news, scandal, and popular writing”¹¹² from which it has been argued that the British novel arose in the eighteenth century. These novels were meant to take an ethically and morally higher ground, one of the consequences being that “it had to cleanse and purge its past.”¹¹³ This, Vermeule holds, made “characters less fascinating.”¹¹⁴ This “gossip-phobia,” in Vermeule’s words, seems to be reiterated in modernist novels, however for different reasons than what had been the case in early novels. If we are to believe Vermeule’s theories on why we care about literary characters, eliminating – or even reducing – the gossip-factor would seem poor judgment by the novelist, and if it is really so that literary characters of modernist novels are less compelling than those of other novels, the relative lack of social information may be key to understanding why. “The modern novel has renounced social information of a direct, unmediated kind,”¹¹⁵ says Vermeule, claiming that this is a “curious logic to a form that repeatedly flays the gossips: in some deep way, it is flaying itself.”¹¹⁶

4.4 Moral and values

That “the social order is intrinsically moral, for it is made up of shoulds and oughts, triumph and shame, villains and heroes” was pointed out in the aforementioned quote by Leslie Brothers. This is a fact that is highly relevant to the concept of gossip. For example, there is hardly any greater gossip than a scandal, and in order to have a scandal, there needs to be perimeters by which we can define this concept. Questions of what is shameful, who is morally corrupt, and who does good can only be answered when there is consensus within a social group. Vermeule points out: “the view of many modern writers [is] that they alone shoulder the burden of too much freedom since they cannot match their predecessors’ confidence in a properly morally ordered world.”¹¹⁷ Previously, novels had been largely concerned with moral questions, and themes such as adultery and crime were issues that fascinated many readers. Then came a new day in which one started to rethink such concepts as morality and religion, and these themes no longer had the same salience. Vermeule suggests that, to some readers, the narrator sometimes played a God-like role, namely that of

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 167

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 169

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 170

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 145

“a person to whom moral questions are particularly relevant and interesting.”¹¹⁸ This was also alluded to above by Gemzøe when he referred to Bakhtin’s suggestion that “the author is likened to an almighty God,” a phenomenon one frequently observed in classic literature, such as works by Milton and Coleridge. In *Mrs. Dalloway* there is not an abundance of moral issues to be dealt with – at least not on the personal level. That Peter is planning to marry the wife of a Major in the Indian Army is one of those few facts we are presented with that may be quite scandalous to some readers, but we do not know this Major, we do not know the woman, we do not know the circumstances, and we do not really know Peter all that well. He is merely a relative stranger that we have “heard” Clarissa think about, who suddenly walks into the story revealing this news. Whether or not it would be wrong for Peter to pursue this woman, we do not know, as we do not know the circumstances or the people involved. Without these morally conditioned “shoulds” and “oughts” – in part caused by the lack of knowledge of the characters – the concepts of hero and villain lose ground. Interestingly, by placing the Dalloways within London’s social elite, Woolf has done a good job of laying the potential groundwork for morally conditioned gossip and scandal – nothing tastes as good as gossip about the high and mighty. “Gossip is concerned with power,”¹¹⁹ says Vermeule, and she refers to the observation by Samuel Johnson that “only the poor have privacy.”¹²⁰ However, unfortunately, Woolf has failed to set up an environment of well-rendered, significant characters around the Dalloways with recognizable heroes and villains for which social information about Clarissa and Richard – or any character – would be interesting. Nor has she made personalities for the Dalloways that are likely to produce scandals, or invite others to feel *Schadenfreude* should bad luck strike – nor are they depicted as heroes or villains. Moreover, Clarissa says: “[she] had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her – faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions, like this of Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch [...]”¹²¹ Thus, Woolf has “purged” her main character of all the human traits that are really interesting to the Machiavellian mind – she has chosen to render characters who refuse to be fully realized human beings, characters who refuse to confront the Lady Brutons of their world. This is odd for somebody who, in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” seemed to reject conventions. What Clarissa is mostly preoccupied with is exactly that – to live by expectations and conventions within her upper-class society. Again,

¹¹⁸ Vermeule, *Why Do We...*, p. 145

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 154

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 154

¹²¹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 32

Woolf may have chosen to do this in order to make a point: to criticize what she disliked about upper class society. If this is the case, she could be said to have created less compelling characters to prove her point in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” that the interesting ladies are those in the corner opposite. However, with this second agenda she has done exactly what she criticized the Edwardians of doing, namely that of writing for other purposes than that of rendering character because these are interesting in themselves. She seems to have set up a set of characters largely with the purpose of criticizing and proving points. Moreover, the apparent unwillingness to treat moral issues may also have contributed to a lack of interest in the novel on the part of middlebrow readers. Clearly, modernist writers did not – like many Victorian novelists – aim to moralize, but, according to Vermeule, “[t]he attempt to write amoral fiction – like the attempt to be amoral – is doomed because human psychology is inevitably moral psychology [...]”¹²² If human psychology is moral psychology, concerning ourselves with moral issues should be an activity we are drawn to, perhaps closely linked to mind reading. It is reasonable to assume that when we mind read, we presuppose that the people we observe are equipped with a certain set of values; that this is a prerequisite for predicting their thoughts and actions. By not providing us with information conducive to making moral judgments on the characters’ minds and actions, and by not letting the characters explicitly act in a morally dubious way, Woolf may have deprived middlebrow readers – or what Woolf called the common readers – of one of the most enjoyable aspects of reading fiction.

4.5 Complexity and reality

Vermeule points to the importance of roundness in Machiavellian characters, in addition to flat characters up against which they may be played: “The mind reading payoff comes when flat and round characters interact in what Alex Woloch, in his magisterial study of minor characters, calls ‘the character space of the novel’.”¹²³ In *Mrs. Dalloway*, both main characters are somewhat round, partly as a result of the style of narration, but due to their relatively static minds – not helped by the fact that we only visit them for one day – they may come off as rather flat after all. As Vermeule holds, “[t]he test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way.”¹²⁴ Few who have read *Mrs. Dalloway* would praise the novel for its many unexpected occurrences – Septimus’ suicide perhaps being the

¹²² Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 135

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. 83

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 81

only one (although, the fact that he is suicidal is reiterated from an early point). That Woolf should let the character aspect suffer at the expense of social criticism seems an unnecessary flaw of this author, as she, in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” seemed to do a good job of conveying the two characters she observed on the train while showing how they had been affected by circumstances. Here she “steeps herself in the atmosphere”¹²⁵ while at the same time creating a story around the characters, suggesting what lives they lead, the possible relation between them, their thoughts and feelings about each other, and so on. Here she lays the groundwork for a compelling story with characters in focus, where the characters have influence upon each other, shown through their interactions as well as explanations by the narrator. There is tension, and the reader’s curiosity is awakened. Mrs. Brown is envisioned by Woolf “in the centre of all sorts of different scenes,”¹²⁶ and, towards the end, she is described to have taken “her heroic decision.”¹²⁷ As opposed to Clarissa, Mrs. Brown is still very much alive and thinking for herself. She has not, like Clarissa has, accepted her circumstances and lives complacently enough in them. Woolf says that Mrs. Brown “imposed herself”¹²⁸ upon her and made her “begin almost automatically to write a novel about her.”¹²⁹ Had it been Clarissa Dalloway sitting on that train, in her petticoats and new gloves, it seems unlikely that she should have prompted Woolf to write about her. She is simply too conventional; too much of a typical representative of an upper class society wife. She is concerned with trivialities. She is too flat. Woolf has, like she expressed it in “Modern Fiction,” rendered an “ordinary mind on an ordinary day.”¹³⁰

This is a curious choice by Woolf, as she in “Modern Fiction” criticizes writers she calls “materialist” – such as Mr. Bennett – for being too concerned with trivialities: “If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word, materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring.”¹³¹ Clarissa is – albeit the focus on her contemplations and her past – concerned with matters such as parties, flowers, shopping, dresses, and so on. Considering the discussions above regarding the interests of the middlebrow reader, it is no wonder that this focus should fail to fascinate this audience. In their book *The Nature of*

¹²⁵ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 4

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” p. 2089

¹³¹ *ibid.*, p. 2088

Narrative Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg say: “[...] if the dominant mimetic impulse pushes us toward ordinary characters in recognizable situations, how are banality and triviality to be avoided?”¹³² Banality and triviality are probably exact opposites of what middlebrow readers look for in a novel – their interests lay more with, as we have seen, drama and scandals. Modernist novelists tended to be concerned with being true to reality – what life is really like, as Woolf put it. One of the problems with this focus when the middlebrow reader is concerned is that, as alluded to above, a good story – with all its implications – tends to be far more compelling than renderings true to reality and plausibility.

In his book *Plot, Story, and the Novel* Robert Caserio refers to Northrop Frye’s comments on the “disregard of plausibility”¹³³ in Dickens’ plotting. Frye holds that “[r]eal life does not start or stop; it never ties up loose ends; it never manifests meaning or purpose [...] it is never comic or tragic, ironic or romantic, or anything else that has a shape.”¹³⁴ Considering the characteristics of the middlebrow reader that have been suggested, it seems that “real life” without beginnings or ends, with loose ends, without meaning or purpose, and so on, is not something that the middlebrow reader wants to see in a novel. Caserio says: “For Frye, ‘the twist’ is implausible and does not grapple with or express any realities other than our imagination’s desire.”¹³⁵ However, the “imagination’s desire” may be an important factor in understanding why people enjoy reading fiction. If you have a Machiavellian mind, triviality, banality, and realism are likely to be far less interesting to you than action-filled stories featuring characters who act in erratic ways – who carry out actions that you do not normally observe people engaging in. If strategy testing is a common property of the middlebrow fiction reader, as suggested by Vermeule, it is reasonable to assume that the more improbable the actions of characters would be in the real world, the more desirable it would be for the middlebrow reader to tag along imaginatively. Realism and banality is what the reader experiences *outside* of fiction – he may read fiction to escape from exactly this.

We have seen that Woolf made a distinction between “real” and “lifelike,” and that to her a “real” character does not have to be “lifelike” – reality to Woolf is reality as perceived by the character in question. It seems as if the middlebrow reader may actually desire

¹³² Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 173

¹³³ Northrop Frye referred to in Robert Caserio, *Plot, Story, and the Novel: From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 65

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67

something somewhat “lifelike” in that he wishes to imagine the actions in a story actually taking place in the real world. Probability in the sense that it is likely that the characters and the actions could easily have been properties of the real world seems to be of less importance. Woolf, on the other hand, seems to have prioritized probability in *Mrs. Dalloway*, despite her statement in “Modern Fiction” that “[t]he writer seems constrained [...] by some [...] tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide [...] an air of probability [...] that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats [...]”.¹³⁶ Ironically, the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* seem to look and act precisely according to what one would expect from their stereotypical personality types.

4.6 Pessimism, passivity, and reluctance to change

There is in *Mrs. Dalloway* a lack of conflicting interests, probably the most important prerequisite for Machiavellian novels, and perhaps of good stories in general. Society is depicted as something that is harmful to the health of the characters, but this factor is a circumstance rather than a character. It is depicted more like a brick wall that the characters have learned to accept rather than something they attempt to act against. Keen presents a telling example in this regard. She has examined responses to the book *A Fine Balance*, a novel by Rohinton Mistry, assigned by Oprah Winfrey to members of her book club. *A Fine Balance* is a postcolonial novel rendering the sufferings of Indian people during the 1975 – 1977 State of Emergency. She points to a reader’s response, presented in a letter to Winfrey:

This book was really hard for me. I felt like everyone who struggled and tried in this book failed. And I had a hard time understanding, because I can’t get through my day thinking that no matter what you do, it isn’t going to help in the end [...]. And the fact that no one is responsible. There’s no clear villain!¹³⁷

This reader finds it troubling that there is no clear definition of good and evil; bad things happen to good people, there is a prevailing hopelessness affecting the characters with which we sympathize, and – perhaps most frustrating – there is no one to blame, and no justice at the end. This prevailing hopelessness is also at work in *Mrs. Dalloway*, although it is less dramatic and more accepted by the characters than in *A Fine Balance*. However, Clarissa’s party could be seen as an attempt of trying to improve circumstances. She tries to “bring people together” to break the lack of communication. Working against her – however not

¹³⁶ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” p. 2089

¹³⁷ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 113

deliberately – are the Bradshaws, who “[talked] of death at her party.”¹³⁸ However, the Bradshaws are representatives of society without intentions to counter Clarissa; they are not “villains.” Moreover, Clarissa does express dismay over Peter’s wedding plans, but the thought of doing anything about it is unthinkable. She is, after all, a supposedly happily married fifty-two year old. Again we have this prevailing refusal to do much to change people or circumstances; there can be no conflict of interests as nobody can really be bothered to take a great interest in anything. The passivity we find in *Mrs. Dalloway* may exclude any great interest the reader might have taken in one or more of the characters.

As for the reader, if the British reading public at the time was anything like Woolf’s description of them in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” they should be very pleased with Clarissa Dalloway:

Here is the British public sitting by the writer’s side and saying in its vast and unanimous way: ‘Old women have houses. They have fathers. They have incomes. They have servants. They have hot-water bottles [...]. But now with your Mrs. Brown – how are we to believe in her?’¹³⁹

Woolf has sat Clarissa up in a house with servants, equipping her with evening gowns, gloves, and a prominent husband. This is interesting, as one of the things she criticized the Edwardians for in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” was that they “have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there.”¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, she seems to have done the same in *Mrs. Dalloway*, contrasting stereotypical features of the upper class of Clarissa and Richard with the features of Septimus’ and Rezia’s lower middle class. Interestingly, Woolf also says in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” of the British public that “they must see the hot-water bottle first,”¹⁴¹ and in the case of Clarissa, the hot-water bottle has certainly been provided. She has been placed in a setting with all the recognizable features of an upper-class wife of a politician in early 20th century London. Woolf has used the tools of the Edwardians. There is a paradox in that Woolf in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” claims that “human character changed,”¹⁴² but at the same time she seems to suggest that the reading public still depends on the old tools. If her hope was to change people’s expectations regarding novels, as may be implied when she says of the reading public: “[i]n England it is a very suggestible and docile creature, which, once you get it to attend, will believe implicitly

¹³⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 156

¹³⁹ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 9

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*, p. 2

what is told for any number of years,”¹⁴³ *Mrs. Dalloway* does not seem to be a committed step in that direction. She does admit that “Mr. Bennett has some reason when he complains that our Georgian writers are unable to make us believe that our characters are real. I am forced to agree that they do not pour out three immortal masterpieces with Victorian regularity every autumn.”¹⁴⁴ She seems to believe that this is due to the transition phase in which they write; a contemporary lack of “code of manners.”¹⁴⁵ Is it possible, then, that Woolf was afraid of taking it upon herself to wholeheartedly attempt to introduce new codes of manners – for example to abandon previously cherished characters from the upper class – lest she should fail to appeal to the reading public of the time? As alluded to above, de Gay brings attention to the literary past’s bearing upon Woolf, saying that “the literary past had a profound impact on the content of her novels, on her philosophies of fiction and on certain aspects of her fictional method.”¹⁴⁶ Moreover, in “Modern Fiction,” Woolf herself states that “[o]ur quarrel, then, is not with the classics,”¹⁴⁷ some of which she refers to as “masterpieces.”¹⁴⁸ She recognizes that there is inspiration to be found in the classic novels, saying that “certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert.”¹⁴⁹ Perhaps *Mrs. Dalloway* was a somewhat nervous and halfhearted attempt to get the reader to follow her in a different direction by presenting him with recognizable features, to lure him down a new path, using some of the old tools. However, it could seem as if Woolf has gone down a slightly wrong path with *Mrs. Dalloway*, keeping the wrong tools while discarding the right ones, if we look at the matter with characterization and the middlebrow reader as our main concern.

As for Septimus and Rezia, they are members of the lower middle class who have been victimized by the draft, instituted by the governing class. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” she seems to suggest that the novelist look at subjects previously ignored – “the lady in the corner opposite.” Septimus and Rezia are perhaps “ladies” in the corner opposite, but she seems to fail to realize them as such. So much focus is placed on Septimus’ mental illness that it is to the exclusion of much else, resulting in Septimus coming off more of a symbol than a character. Tellingly, Woolf said herself in her diary: “[Septimus] may be left vague –

¹⁴³ *ibid.* p. 1

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ de Gay, *Virginia Woolf’s Novels...*, p. 1

¹⁴⁷ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” p. 2087

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

as a mad person is – not so much character as an idea [...]”¹⁵⁰ One might question, then, her motivations for creating Septimus at all. Was he meant to be a flat character up against which Clarissa – a supposedly round character – could be contrasted? The narrator allows Septimus such a large amount of space in the novel – including ample access to his thoughts – that he could be said to lose his possible role as a flat character merely in power of the extension to which he is rendered. Furthermore, as there is no interaction between Clarissa and Septimus, his value seems to weaken. What interest do we have in hearing about his thoughts and doings as long as he is outside of a possible character space – not interacting with any very significant characters? Woolf’s idea may have been that Septimus should serve as a character who underlines the points she tries to make regarding Clarissa – after all, a point is being made of how Septimus’ death affects Clarissa – but Clarissa has no bearing whatsoever upon Septimus. If this is the case, allowing Septimus such ample space in the novel may be a mistake, for as Vermeule claims:

Readers typically adapt their point of view to one or another of a story’s characters, usually the protagonist, and make their way through the narrative by tracking that character’s actions [...]. So important is the reader’s attachment to the protagonist’s point of view that he even has a hard time focusing on objects in a text if those objects are not closely connected to what the protagonist is doing [...].¹⁵¹

What Woolf seems to have ended up with, regardless of her intentions, is the reader’s perception of two protagonists in two different worlds, both of which are rather stereotypical – the reader may have succeeded in figuring them both out merely by taking a look at their property, social status and provenance. Or, in Septimus’ case, just knowing that he is a mental patient as a result of his involvement in the war may be enough, as other aspects of him are as good as absent. The Edwardians’ supposedly stereotypical representation based on external factors seems to be a property of *Mrs. Dalloway* as well. Had the characters been more complex and multi-faceted – more round – and had there been a greater degree of interaction between Clarissa and Septimus, free indirect discourse may have served as a great advantage to the reader’s mind reading activity, allowing him to foresee each character’s next move based on his extensive knowledge of their personalities and mindsets. The presence of stereotypical flat characters may be – as we have seen – a great advantage to a story, but when the protagonists are equally stereotypical and predictable, the static quality of the reading experience may cost readers’ interest.

¹⁵⁰ Hawthorne, *Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway...*, p. 36

¹⁵¹ Vermeule, *Why Do We Care...*, p. 47

5 The significance of narrative style and plot to the appeal of character

In our examination of theories on the appeal of characters, two aspects have been hitherto only briefly touched upon; namely the importance of narrative style and of plot when it comes to characterization. It was suggested above that free indirect discourse may facilitate mind reading by way of expressing characters' personalities extensively, and we may have come to suspect that the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis presupposes a certain kind of plot. It was for example suggested earlier when considering strategy testing as a motivation for reading fiction that the lack of a captivating plot may prevent the reader from finding the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* compelling. In the following the possible significance of narrative style and plot to the perception of characters as convincing will be elaborated upon.

5.1 Narrative style

The possible link between the free indirect discourse used in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the reader's empathy and/or sympathy for the characters was alluded to above. But how significant are the style of narration and the authorial voice to the reader's perception of the appeal of the characters? We saw that Bakhtin had some thoughts on the challenges facing the role of the modernist author, and these are issues with which also Vermeule, Keen, and Hawthorn are concerned. Vermeule refers to Alvin Goldman, who emphasizes the role of the author when it comes to reader's empathy and perspective; he holds that the reader will be highly influenced by whatever attitude to the characters the author conveys, and that – in Vermeule's words – we “simply go along for the ride.”¹⁵² If this is the case, the reader may have trouble locating his ride in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as the author's attitude to the characters could be perceived as rather obscure. We saw that Bakhtin recognized that instead of being an “all-mighty God,” the role of the author changed with modernity, and that the author now should not “seek to limit and finalize” – nor should the hero “allow himself to be objectivized.”¹⁵³ This could be interpreted as a suggestion for the author not to attempt to define a hero, or any character, that more should be left up to the reader. However, as Hawthorn points out, “[a] writer's language is not a neutral ‘thing’ [...], [i]t is the accumulated richness of the life experience of that

¹⁵² *ibid.*, 43

¹⁵³ Gemzøe, “Modernism, Narrativity...”, p. 128

writer.”¹⁵⁴ Thus, it may be completely impossible for a writer to render characters and story without his or her own opinions shining through in one way or another. Hawthorn further states: “[i]t is certainly correct to suggest that there are many appeals to the attitudes and prejudices of a particular social class in Virginia Woolf’s language.”¹⁵⁵ This suggests that the author – or at least the narrator – belongs to a certain social class and is endowed with opinions about other social classes, such as that of the Dalloways, that the reader may or may not agree with. Hawthorn has several examples of how these opinions are manifested, one being the “narrator-interruption of a character’s stream of thoughts [...] within parentheses.”¹⁵⁶ He sees this as an “implied narrative authority,”¹⁵⁷ sometimes expressing class condescension. In his examples, he claims that there is a class condescension towards the lower classes, like when “[t]he mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young,”¹⁵⁸ but we do frequently find parenthesized opinions that could be seen as critique of the upper class as well, like when Hugh Whitbread is said to be “almost too well dressed, always.”¹⁵⁹ One may wonder, then, if this so-called “narrative authority” actually does represent the opinions of one narrator authority, or if they are descriptions of the opinions of the character whose mind we are inside at the moment. As David Bradshaw says of Woolf’s choice of free indirect discourse: “It is a technique which allowed Woolf to fuse a number of discrete narrative perspectives and so draw together an assembly of characters [...]”¹⁶⁰ He points out that the omniscient narrator takes on different idiolects according to which character is in focus, something which may further strengthen the suggestion that in this novel the narrator is not meant to be an authority with its own thoughts and opinions. One of Woolf’s motifs when writing *Mrs. Dalloway* was almost certainly to contrast characters from different social classes, and it is reasonable to assume that she procured to communicate the different opinions held by members of the different classes. What effects several narrative perspectives in one novel may have on the middlebrow reader is not clear, but the possibility exists that it may contribute to uncertainty and confusion for some. As alluded to above, modernist novelists often chose to leave far more up to the reader than had been the norm, something which may have served to frustrate and confuse.

¹⁵⁴ Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf’s Novels...*, p. 99

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 7

¹⁶⁰ David Bradshaw, “Introduction” in Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” Woolf said: “You see one thing in character, and I another.”¹⁶¹ She recognizes that the treatment of character would depend on the age, country, and temperament of the writer,¹⁶² something which may suggest that Woolf too was of the opinion that a character may come off differently depending on who describes it. It is reasonable to assume, then, that the reader’s perception of character will depend on who presents it. This may be seen in relation to the abovementioned lack of a shared set of morals and values among the reading public of the times, something which had been less of a problem during earlier times. Gemzøe says the following of Bakhtin’s view on modernity: “[j]ust like the divine, the literary author-ity is dead or at least reduced to being *deus absconditus*, to invisibility and silence. This is due to a loss of positive, proclamable and shared compelling values, of an inevitable, undeniable authority.”¹⁶³ This may be unfortunate with regards to the convincingness of the characters, as the reader may find himself struggling to define the characters to himself – not only due to the aforementioned lack of contextualization with other characters, but also due to a lack of a guiding, authorial voice whose importance was pointed to by Vermeule. In a time where there is a lack of shared moral and values, perhaps there is a need for an author to make explicit what he or she perceives as right and wrong. This would most likely in large part have to be conveyed through a more or less explicit attitude to characters on part of the author. As Lodge suggests, “[Woolf] has not [...] entirely resolved her attitude to characters like Mrs. Dalloway, nor is she entirely open about the degree of indulgence she expects the reader to extend to them.”¹⁶⁴ This may be fully intentional on Woolf’s part – several critics have suggested that Woolf wished to leave a good deal of interpretation up to the reader of her novels. As Carole Rodier points out in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*: “[t]here is a common awareness that Woolf is open-ended and that, consequently, any attempt to draw ready-made conclusions about it [Woolf’s writings] runs the risk of debasing it [...] The reader is challenged to respond [...] in an imaginative and creative way.”¹⁶⁵ It is reasonable to assume that the middlebrow reader – probably used to reading novels containing some form of “morality tale” reinforced by authorial guidance – should feel somewhat at a loss when left to his own

¹⁶¹ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 4

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Gemzøe, “Modernism, Narrativity...,” p. 131

¹⁶⁴ David Lodge referred to in Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway...*, p. 100

¹⁶⁵ Carole Rodier, “The French Reception of Woolf: An *État Présent* of *Études Woolfiennes*” in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, ed. Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 53

devices to such a large degree as is the case in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf may not have succeeded in finding the new, authorial position desired by Bakhtin, or, perhaps was Bakhtin wrong, perhaps there is no need for a reformation of the authorial position of novelists? There is a possibility that the reader in general – at least the middlebrow reader – looks for a somewhat authoritative, guiding voice when reading fiction – one which “limits” and “finalizes” the hero, among other things. Perhaps middlebrow readers do not only look for the opinions, circumstances and actions of literary characters when reading novels, perhaps they do also look for the opinions of the characters’ creator. Maybe the middlebrow reader finds it comfortable to have the presence of an authoritative voice against which he or she may compare his/her opinions – as a reassuring verification of the “rightness” of his/her judgments while exercising the Machiavellian intelligence. If this is the case, the role of the author may be pivotal to the understanding of why characters of modernist novels may have failed to fascinate at least middlebrow readers: so much openness and the lack of definitions of wrong and right may have a baffling effect.

It was mentioned above that novelists had traditionally taken on the role of an authority, ready to provide guidance and answers. With regards to the lack of solution and answers in *Mrs. Dalloway* – and in so many other modernist novels – it is interesting to again return to “Modern Fiction,” where Woolf seemed to see this absence of resolutions as a property of the Russian writers:

[...] we might speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind. It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair.¹⁶⁶

Thus, she seems to recognize the possible predicaments of the reader when presented with a work of fiction portraying life as a mystery producing only questions and no answers. She moves on to set English fiction apart from Russian, saying:

They are right perhaps; unquestionably they see further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision. But perhaps we see something that escapes them, or why should this voice of protest mix itself with our gloom? The voice of protest is the voice of another and ancient civilisation which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than to suffer and understand. English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” p. 2091

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

What Woolf seems to recognize here is that British readers – assuming that is the referent of “our” – would rather see activity and joy over suffering and contemplation. However, if we consider *Mrs. Dalloway*, there seems to be quite a bit more suffering and understanding in this novel than enjoying and fighting. Perhaps Woolf was of the opinion that she had successfully fused humor (in the shape of sarcasm) and “the activities of the intellect” in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for as she wrote in her diary regarding her plans for *Mrs. Dalloway*: “[...] how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth.”¹⁶⁸ However, one cannot deny that she has honored the Russian tradition of posing questions without answering them, and that she has depicted suffering and inconclusiveness. It is strange that she should write a novel with which she ran the risk of producing in the reader the resentment she recognized as a possible quality of works featuring such components as futile questioning and inconclusiveness. It is clear that Woolf did not wish to act as the omnipotent novelist of times past, and she seems to have taken a gigantic step in the opposite direction. However, she may have served her common readers better by assuming some middle ground.

Keen is highly concerned with what she refers to as “narrative empathy,” and one of her points of interest is to find out whether there are specific narrative techniques that more readily invite reader’s empathy than others. She says:

A commonplace of narrative theory suggests that an internal perspective best promotes character identification and readers’ empathy. Achieved through first-person self-narration, figural narration, or authorial narration that moves omnisciently inside many characters’ minds, an inside view should increase the chance of character identification.¹⁶⁹

As we have seen, Keen sees character identification as crucial to empathy, and she sees empathy as highly significant to the appeal of the characters. She points out that several theorists opine that narrated monologue – representations of characters’ consciousness, found in *Mrs. Dalloway* through free indirect discourse – as well as interior monologue (also very present in *Mrs. Dalloway*) and first-person narration are techniques that are more conducive to readers’ empathy and sympathy than purely externalized narration.¹⁷⁰ However, Keen holds that “[...] relatively externalized and brief statements about a character’s experiences and

¹⁶⁸ Monica Girard, *Mrs. Dalloway: Genesis and Palimpsests*. Speech given at conference at the University of Lyon, France (date unknown). PDF transcript: http://www.google.no/#hl=no&output=search&scIent=psy-ab&q=monica+girard+mrs+dalloway:+gensis+and+&oq=monica+girard+mrs+dalloway:+gensis+and+&aq=f&aqj=&aql=&gs_nf=1&gs_l=hp.12...830.9719.0.12454.39.38.0.1.1.0.289.6046.0j30j8.39.0.Byl8HcF3YJQ&pbx=1&bav=on.2.or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf,.cf.osb&fp=cc7a7d71db642612&biw=1080&bih=534 [Accessed 29 April 2012], p. 5

¹⁶⁹ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 96

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 96-97

mental state may be sufficient to invoke empathy in a reader.”¹⁷¹ Moreover: “Indeed, sometimes the potential for character identification and readers’ empathy *decreases* with sustained exposure to a particular figure’s thoughts or voice.”¹⁷² As suggested above, the access the reader has to the thoughts and feelings of the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* results in a situation in which it becomes difficult to sympathize with certain characters while rejecting others, in turn making it almost impossible to identify heroes and villains (at least among the main characters). The idea that too much insight should also hinder empathy seems particularly true in *Mrs. Dalloway* due to the personalities and situations of the characters: the characters may not be appealing as a result of the personalities with which they are endowed and the situations in which they live. It is only natural, then, that too much insight into the minds of characters should reinforce any antipathy we may feel towards them. When, in addition, there is a lack of narrative empathy inclined sufficiently towards a main character, as discussed above, reader empathy may become further problematic. Moreover, we see that also Keen seems to incline toward a narration that is relatively authoritative and unambiguous – first-person self-narration, figural narration, and “authorial narration that moves omnisciently inside many characters’ minds”¹⁷³ will usually have the effect of conveying one “guiding voice.” As suggested above, this may be favored by the middlebrow reader, consciously or not. Who to sympathize with had often been made very explicit in traditional novels, and the lack of this narrative empathy could perhaps frustrate the reader – particularly in *Mrs. Dalloway* where there seems to be no hero. A new “code of manners”¹⁷⁴ with regards to the novel may not be desired by the average novel reader. However, Keen says: “[...] I am inclined to agree with Wayne Booth that no one ethical effect inheres in a single narrative device [...],”¹⁷⁵ meaning that as far as empathy goes, an author needs to bring a lot more to the table than an appropriate style of narration. Keen holds: “Empathy with a situation responds to plot as much as to character, though it often finds its focus in a character’s feelings. Narrative theorists know how difficult it is to disentangle plot from character, for without events the agents of fiction are inert.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 96

¹⁷² *ibid.*

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 96

¹⁷⁴ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” p. 10

¹⁷⁵ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 98

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 79

5.2 Plot

Plot is one of those aspects of the novel that had traditionally been given very high priority – often the highest priority. In *Mrs. Dalloway* this has been given an exceptionally limited focus – a phenomenon found in many modernist novels. As Keen suggested above, plot is closely connected to character; in “traditional” novels it is through the plot that the characters act out their lives, and it is through these acts that we in large part deduce their personalities and immerse ourselves in their environment. The plot may be seen as the basis of the novel; it is usually the happenings in a story we are interested in. When somebody says they have read a good novel, people tend to ask “what was the book about?” rather than *who* the book was about. Scholes and Kellogg refer to epics and sagas when they consider character and plot, stating that “[a]s in the epic, character in saga is conceived in terms of plot [...] the characters are not endowed with any attributes extraneous to the action being presented. [...] every aspect of character is given expression in action.”¹⁷⁷ One may argue that characters in epics and sagas are rather flat, a feature that we may not want to see in the hero of the story, as alluded to above, and that times have changed – we have become more informed, more interested in psychology, and so on, something which we may wish to see reflected in literature. However, as it has been claimed in this thesis, modernist novelists seem to have failed at least the middlebrow reader in terms of characterization, and as the rethinking or complete abandonment of plot was a phenomenon upheld – if not introduced – by modernist writers, this feature has to be considered a possible culprit. The lack of an adequate plot could possibly be a shortcoming in modernist novels, resulting in inadequate characterization. It was suggested above that when characters are not allowed enough “play-time” in the character space, they become static and less interesting. Interaction with other characters is, of course, usually a very important part of the action and story in a traditional novel, and usually the most important feature of plot. As Caserio says in his book *Plot, Story, and the Novel*, “[i]f we believe Aristotle, action is the essential necessity of life. ‘The end for which we live is a certain activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our own action – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse’.”¹⁷⁸ If we are to assume – as suggested above – that the middlebrow reader embodies qualities such as a Machiavellian intelligence, interest in mind-reading, and craving for gossip – that is, the actions of others – it is perhaps reasonable to assume that such a reader would assent to Aristotle’s claim. He or she would probably give

¹⁷⁷ Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 173

¹⁷⁸ Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, p. xi

primacy to the doings of others rather than their qualities and contemplations. Interesting in this regard, Caserio says of the novelist-storytellers (that is, not the modernist novelists but those novelists committed to story-telling rather than “showing”) that they have been “[...] committed to plot because they have found it the complement of what they most value. And what they value most is a life more active than contemplative: a commitment to engendering continuities and [...] a passionate purpose [...].”¹⁷⁹ These novelists draw a parallel between life and fiction, insisting that acts make life purposeful and thus wish to have this purposefulness reflected in fiction. Caserio speaks of “life understood as purposeful action”¹⁸⁰ as a quality of such novelists, and throughout his book he advocates acts and narrated story over inwardness and contemplation as qualities of novels that reassure the reader of the meaningfulness of life through acts.

One of the ways in which Caserio supports his notion that action in a novel should take precedence over inwardness is by comparing early and later books by Henry James. This is an author who, according to Caserio, initially wrote novels featuring “reflective stillness, of a kind of narrative reason seeking to contain and inhibit action”¹⁸¹ only to display in later novels what Caserio sees as “maturity” on part of this author,¹⁸² namely the realization of the importance of action. The modernist novel has often been compared to paintings, or pieces of music, and Caserio points to in the early James a “favoring of the aesthetic and ethical bearing of *picture*”¹⁸³ – much in line with the aesthetic movement’s “art for art’s sake” approach mentioned in the introduction – something which should come to change in later novels to “more honor given to the experience and heroism of action.”¹⁸⁴ To explain this change in James’ relationship to action, Caserio says:

The featuring of act in the late James is the result of his growing conviction that the inhibition of action, either by passive, still, and quiescent life or by a limitation upon action’s intellectual and moral diversity and risk, is a blow to civilization, to the fortunes of human community [...]¹⁸⁵

Thus, to believe in acts is to believe in the meaningfulness of our value as actors within the human community – as agents capable of justifying the name of “civilization.” It has earlier in this thesis been suggested that readers may feel disgruntled when helplessness and the

¹⁷⁹ Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, p. xxi

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 200

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222

inability to act in order to change circumstances are depicted – or, as is the case in *Mrs. Dalloway* – there is a certain unwillingness to act. Caserio holds that several of James’ contemporaries, and James himself, made “prestigious a rebellious, amoral quietism, a dissociation of sensibility or human fineness from the creativity of action.”¹⁸⁶ In this mode of writing the characters’ intellect and reasoning *about* actions tend to be focused on rather than actions in and by themselves, a phenomenon very present in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Caserio says: “[v]iewed solely as speculative thought or appreciation, narrative intellectual and moral reasoning is a thematizing of experience that separates what happens from perspectives on what happens.”¹⁸⁷ He suggests that the young James saw this separation as “intellectual and moral richness,”¹⁸⁸ but that he later came to “believe in a union of signs and referents with action, in a closer wedding of theme and plot [...] to think [plot and story] more prime and precious than picture.”¹⁸⁹ Thus, James seemed to have come to the realization that what is being depicted in a novel should be closely tied up with action rather than quiet, inward contemplation. *Mrs. Dalloway* could be seen as an example of a novel in which direct action on the part of the main characters has been undermined in favor of contemplation of circumstances and past actions – a novel in which characters’ minds take precedence over characters’ actions. This may be unfortunate, for if we are to believe Caserio: “To collect pictures is not enough; what the pictures show must be matched by a deed [...] Civilization needs such resolving, constitutive acts, by means of even ‘nefarious’ plots and plotters, since such resolutions create the stories [...] for which humanity hungers.”¹⁹⁰

This is something with which Scholes and Kellogg seem to agree. They point to the typical conflict and resolution pattern of the plotted narrative, saying: “The reader of a narrative can expect to finish his reading having achieved a state of equilibrium – something approaching calm of mind, all passion spent. Insofar as the reader is left with this feeling by any narrative, that narrative can be said to have a plot.”¹⁹¹ If this state of equilibrium is – as seems suggested by Scholes and Kellogg – something that a novel reader is looking for in a novel, he is almost guaranteed to feel frustrated after having read *Mrs. Dalloway*. The predicaments and conflicts that affect the characters are either portrayed as unsolvable, or there is an unwillingness to solve them. No solution – no sense of equilibrium – is offered.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 200

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 203-204

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 231

¹⁹¹ Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 212

Scholes and Kellogg also claim that “[a]ll plots depend on tension and resolution,”¹⁹² and in the quote above they seem to suggest that “equilibrium after passion spent” is a prerequisite of plot. Perhaps *Mrs. Dalloway*, then, cannot be said to have a plot at all, as it is largely devoid of tension, resolution and subsequent equilibrium.

de Gay refers to Elena Gualtieri, who suggests that to Woolf the novel “represented the possibility of experimenting with new forms and shapes,”¹⁹³ an attitude which comes to expression also in Woolf’s own writings, for example in “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” For example, in the former, she asks, as we have seen, “[i]s it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit [...] we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.”¹⁹⁴ The suggestion following the question here may be problematic, for it may be that the novel as a form had – contrary to what Woolf and other modernists liked to believe – established itself as a form not too open for modifications. One of the ways in which the novel may stand apart from other forms of art is that it has had a tendency to appeal to a different audience – an audience that is less concerned with the world of art and more concerned with matters treated above, such as socially and morally meaningful acts, *Schadenfreude*, strategy testing and entertainment. The middlebrow readers will in general tend to have interests and backgrounds that differ from aficionados of other forms of art – such as painting and sculpting – and it is possible, as has been suggested, that the novel has developed into being primarily the business of the less art-concerned. This is only logical if we consider the connection between the “chauvinistic press” and the development of the novel alluded to by Vermeule. We saw that novelists at different points in history attempted to lift the novel up to higher artistic ground, as it were. It was suggested by Vermeule that the renouncing of social information in the novel may have resulted in the novel “flaying” itself. Thus, she seems to recognize that the novel by its definition has developed to require such information. That the novel also requires a plot is no less plausible, as ever since the accounts of the “scandalous press” the actions of others seem to have been what fascinated its audience. Interestingly, some critics seem to also suggest that experimenting with narrative structure may exclude works of fiction from the categorization “novel”; Wolfgang Iser refers to Hans-Jürgen Geisthardt who said of *Mrs. Dalloway*: “[...] a narrative structure is produced which is

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Elena Gualtieri referred to in de Gay, *Virginia Woolf’s Novels...*, p. 1

¹⁹⁴ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” p. 2089

opposed to the traditional novel. The novel becomes a ‘non-novel’ [...].”¹⁹⁵ Thus, by deviating so much from tradition in several respects, Woolf may have removed *Mrs. Dalloway* from the field of novels as we have come to know it, understand it, and appreciate it, and in doing so alienating the readers for whom the novel genre has been most appealing, and the ones to whom she wished to appeal, namely the common readers. The fact that *Mrs. Dalloway* has had such an appeal to academics and critics may further reinforce this idea, as the novel in its traditional form has historically been seen as inferior to other art forms – that it is for a different audience than the highly cultural and highly educated.

Caserio writes: To believe [that the most vital element in literature is its relation to historical human change] means to believe a problem in fiction is a problem in life; a formal struggle in one is an intellectual and moral struggle in the other.”¹⁹⁶ We have seen that several novelists and critics see acts as the most important quality of human life as well as of fiction, and it is reasonable to assume that acts in literature that seem purposeful and relevant to the reader’s life or perception of life should be compelling reading. When characters develop through acts and experience change and resolution through them, this may have a reassuring effect of the reader. It has been suggested that the guidance of the author may be needed, and characters who set examples may be equally desirable. It is reasonable to assume that readers wish to see characters whose lives are developing and improving, as this is something readers wish for their own lives – it gives hope and guidance. Thus, we are left with the possible claims that fiction should feature acts, as these are what give life purpose, and that the problems we find in fiction should in some way be relevant to those of life itself. The latter suggests that the ideas and relations expressed in the novel are relevant to something more general – for example common problems of human life; that the story has some higher significance beyond the story itself. That is, we suppose that a novelist chooses to tell a story because he or she perceives that the ideas and relations he or she connects in the story have some significance to something in the real world.

But how does character development come about? Could one not argue that the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* develop in power of their reflections and reasoning? After all, Clarissa seems to find answers to her worries in dialogue with herself – for example, she

¹⁹⁵ Wicht, Wolfgang, “Installing Modernism: The Reception of Virginia Woolf in the German Democratic Republic” in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, ed. Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 111

¹⁹⁶ Caserio, *Plot, Story....*, p. xiv

seems to come to terms with growing old, and she works through her feelings for Peter. Nevertheless, this may be an inferior kind of development, partially because it does not involve change brought on by other agents. Development and transformation are – according to Caserio – largely dependent on *change*, commonly occurring in the shape of *rescue* or *reversal*. He says: “[t]o put change or reversal at the heart of both intelligence and plot is to insist that thought always recall its genesis in change. And change, the emergence of novelty, the transformation of one condition into another, is the primal act, hence the primal story [...]”¹⁹⁷ He takes Dickens as his leading example when discussing the significance of the aspects of action in the forms of reversal and rescue. These aspects may be decisive to the development and transformation of character, and Caserio claims regarding development and transformation: “[f]or it is these things that stimulate story and theory, not immediate incarnations of experience and not the feelings of the live thing itself.”¹⁹⁸ The last part of this claim of course seems to comment on the situation of the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Thus, there is a favoring of the developing and transforming qualities of action to Caserio’s way of thinking; a favoring of a roundness in character that allows him or her to experience change over the course of the novel, aided by other characters.

When considering *rescue*, this is usually a changing event in the character’s life that brings on the reversal – the improvement of the character’s condition. The rescue tends to be carried out by other characters in the novel in the shape of acts, or by the protagonist himself acting in his own rescue. Caserio points to the “rescuing power of acts represented by the Dickensian sense of plot,”¹⁹⁹ saying that “[f]or Dickens individuation is in effect illusory, and thus the only way for persons to resolve conflicts among the ‘others’ who are simultaneously themselves is through an action that represents in a [...] rescue event.”²⁰⁰ This rescue event, in turn, saves the characters from “chaos, from inhibition of desire and utterance, from indeterminacy of meaning and relation.”²⁰¹ When in *Mrs. Dalloway* there is no search for meaning, no desire for change, and no attempt to improve one’s situation, rescue becomes pointless. If one is not searching for meaning, one may not need people – nor to be rescued – as there is nothing to be rescued from, or rescue is seen as tantamount to impossible. The possibility of defining life’s meanings has been rejected, thus does one not believe in being

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 286

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 33

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 96

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 115

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 93

rescued from “chaos, from inhibition of desire and utterance, from indeterminacy of meaning and relation.”²⁰² In fact, what previous writers had been looking to rescue their characters – and probably also their readers – from, were in many cases the exact same things that modernist writers wanted to illustrate as qualities of life itself, with no intentions of offering “solutions.” The “thing” in itself was seen as constant, inevitable, and worth depicting, with the novel as the medium. In *Mrs. Dalloway* there are, however, potential rescuers. Rezia, for example, devotes most of her energy to attempting to save her husband. Unfortunately, his suicide demonstrates the futility of her attempt, placing her in a position where she appears almost as the joker of the story, always trying and always failing. All the unfortunate circumstantial elements are still present; the gloominess and shortcomings of British society still looming large. Insofar as she could have been seen to play the role of a hero, her chances of assuming this role ends once and for all when death – a circumstantial factor particularly hard to control – wins over the power and good intentions of men.

As mentioned above, Clarissa also attempts to help people by bringing them together – a potential “rescue-event” – but there is an absence of significance attached to her party. We saw that she never resolves the question of “to whom?” and so also she winds up in a position where she works towards a desired end that never materializes – an end that she is even unable to fully define. She does not know to whom the offering of the party is intended, and she finally contemplates the possibility that the significance of her parties is “an offering for the sake of offering [...]”²⁰³ Thus, if the parties represent rescue from “chaos, [...] inhibition of desire and utterance, [...] indeterminacy of meaning and relation”²⁰⁴ people do not seem to realize them as such. If they do, the reader is completely unaware of it, as no character is being depicted as being rescued from such predicaments by the party. One could perhaps say that the rescue event is present, but not the characters to be rescued. Another way of looking at it is to suggest that the parties rescue Clarissa herself more than anyone else – they may rescue her from boredom and solitude. However, if we look at it from that perspective, it is Clarissa who rescues herself by acting on her own behalf – there is an absence of the Dickensian kindred souls, and the rescue event becomes one without reversal and character development in response to interaction with other characters. This may have been different had Clarissa and the party-guests been more significant to each other.

²⁰² *ibid.*, p. 93

²⁰³ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 103

²⁰⁴ Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, p. 93

When it comes to reversal, this may be seen as the most important changing-event of the traditional plot – this is what it all has been about. Still taking Dickens as his example, Caserio says of reversal: “[...] the earnest use of reversal [...] testifies to action as the origin of development, of novelty, and of creativity.”²⁰⁵ Some may claim that in *Mrs. Dalloway* the reversal comes in the shape of Septimus’ suicide, but as he was on this track from the get-go, I will claim that there is no reversal in *Mrs. Dalloway*; that Septimus’ story is more an explanation of how he came to kill himself rather than a story involving a suicide as a disrupting changing-event to a character. There is no development involved, his mindset stays the same, finally leading him to eliminate himself rather than being rescued and thus changed. As for Clarissa, she does not even seem to want reversal or rescue – at least not for herself – as she feels that she is done with life, more or less, as alluded to above. But on the other hand, how much of a reversal can one expect from a novel depicting scarcely twelve hours of the characters’ lives? Of course, Woolf compensates somewhat by extensively invoking the past, but, as we have seen, this may not be interesting to the reader, as this is action completed and not so relevant in terms of reversal or change. Nor does it appear to be particularly relevant to the characters’ lives as acted out in the external world during the time we spend with them. A plot that takes place over time may be crucial to the interest of the middlebrow reader, allowing him to witness several instances of action – among them action that indicates change – as well as time to familiarize himself with the characters. There is probably no reason to doubt Scholes and Kellogg when they claim that “[p]lot requires (as Aristotle [...] observed) a beginning, a middle and an end. In historical narrative this means that a subject must be discerned in the past and cut off from the irrelevant matters with which it has only temporary connection.”²⁰⁶ Although referring to historical narrative, there should be no reason to doubt that the last part of this claim also holds true for other types of narratives: as has been suggested before, irrelevant matters may be detrimental to reader’s attention. Moreover, in *Mrs. Dalloway* these irrelevant matters often show up in the form of other characters, something which may be even more harmful to the reader’s attention than extraneous information about the past. Although descriptions of other characters in the main characters’ environment may serve to comment on the main characters and the environment in which they live, we believe that action is more important than reflection, and wherever other characters are introduced, they should probably always at some point be brought into action

²⁰⁵ Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, pp. 57-58

²⁰⁶ Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 211

with the main character(s). Their main purpose should be to allow a demonstration of the main character(s) development and transformation, and most of them should probably have at least some relevance to the rescue and/or reversal processes affecting the main characters.

Caserio suggests that there is a close relationship between the abandonment of action in modernist literature and the questioning of morality. He says: “[...] when writers and readers of novels lose interest in plot and story, they appear to lose interest in the meaning and moral value of acts.”²⁰⁷ Implied by this is that the acts we are presented with in novels will have moral significance, and that it is this moral significance that interests the reader. Without morality, the acts may be meaningless, if we are to believe Caserio, and the plot with them. Scholes and Kellogg seem to agree with this notion; they point out that “[t]he distrust of the imitation of action [...] has become a distrust of intelligibility, purposefulness, and morality. The distrust of the imitation of action therefore has become a distrust of intelligibility, purposefulness, and morality altogether.”²⁰⁸ The basis for Western understanding of morality has traditionally been Christian values, and when in *Mrs. Dalloway* religion is portrayed as undesirable through the opinions of one of the main characters, this is an expressive suggestion of Woolf’s abandoning of the traditional definitions of moral and values in this novel. Caserio points to “the loss of religious faith”²⁰⁹ as a cause of antagonism to plot, and so we may wonder if religious faith may be of importance to plot – or at least a similar set of shared values that is provided by shared religious adherence. For acts to have meaning, it has been suggested, they must have moral and ethical value. Moreover, with regards to character development, one must have a notion of what “development” in this sense entails, and it is only natural that we call it development when a character has become a better person, and in order to define this, we must base our judgment on a notion of correct behavior. We can hardly do this without morally and ethically based ideas of wrong and right. Interesting in this regard, Scholes and Kellogg says: “[...] the character who merely changes through age and experience, without developing along ethically schematized lines, does not seem to generate a limiting plot pattern the way a purely developmental character does [...]. Development is really a moral motif [...].”²¹⁰ Thus, when a novel sets out to question moral, or largely ignore it, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* seems to do, this will likely be counterproductive to character as it becomes difficult for the reader to identify with the character and the situation, in turn

²⁰⁷ Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, p. xiii

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. xiii

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. xvi

²¹⁰ Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, pp. 168-169

confusing the Machiavellian intelligence and making character development insignificant, or questionable, at best.

“A limiting plot pattern” was mentioned above in the quote by Scholes and Kellogg. If we see this as a plot taking place over a certain time period, with a beginning, middle, and an end, it should be clear that the plot in *Mrs. Dalloway* is not a limiting one. Of course, neither do the characters develop along ethically schematized lines, as suggested in the above paragraph. Caserio also concerns himself with limiting plot patterns, referring to G. K. Chesterton, who described romance – as well as religion – as a “shortening of existence”²¹¹ in which everything “comes quickly to a point – the point,”²¹² and thus themes appropriate to plot not only in terms of interest to the reader, but also for its “shortening of existence” quality. Chesterton says:

Romance is perhaps the highest point of human expression, except indeed religion, to which it is closely allied. Romance resembles religion especially in this, that it is not only a simplification but a shortening of existence. Both romance and religion see everything in an abrupt and fantastic perspective, coming to a point. It is the whole essence of perspective that it comes quickly to a point – the point.²¹³

With regards to this aforementioned “point,” Caserio takes Greek tragedy as an example and says that for Aristotle the stories of Greek tragedy are “most powerful when they shorten and sharpen the human difficulty by bringing experience to the turning point.”²¹⁴ This suggests that a solution is brought forward, a solution that will give the reader/observer the feeling of equilibrium mentioned above. Caserio moves on to compare this to the turning point in Dickens:

[...] the great Victorian plot – preeminently the great Dickensian plot – reverses the expectations of both the characters and of those reading or hearing the story because it assumes that knowledge, life’s value, and the featurings of act are available only through the abrupt and fantastic perspective described by Chesterton.²¹⁵

Again, act is seen as something meaningful and indispensable; something which brings on knowledge and value through a point that is facilitated by a limiting time perspective. Life is described as having meaning and solutions – unlike the situation in *Mrs. Dalloway* – and it takes on wisdom and value through acts that are significant as long as life is seen in an “abrupt and fantastic perspective” – when it is seen in a time-limited perspective in which it

²¹¹ G. K. Chesterton referred to by Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, p. 71

²¹² *ibid.*, p. 71

²¹³ *ibid.*, p. 71

²¹⁴ Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, p. 71-72

²¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 72

has significance in power of what delimits it. In *Mrs. Dalloway* the limiting quality of time seems to be criticized. The ticking of the clocks, for example, is seen as something unfortunate that has a negative effect on people's lives – it does not contribute to give life meaning because no meaningful point is in sight. Moreover, the effects of aging contribute to a gloomy air, expressed for example through Clarissa's contemplations on her own life as well as by her descriptions of the old lady in the window. Rezia too despairs the passing of time, as she would like to have children. Time is something of a tyrant in *Mrs. Dalloway*, threatening to deprive life of meaning rather than contribute it. This is perhaps a natural effect in a work where religion is rejected, romance has no significant bearing, and moral and values are doubted. In such an environment in which the characters struggle to find meaning, time becomes something against which one must fight in order that it not be too late to find the "point." In Clarissa's case, the point seems to possibly exist in the answer to the question "to whom?" (although she does not concern herself too much with finding an answer), whereas in Septimus' case, he no longer seems to be looking for anything, and so he chooses to shorten his existence without the hopes of finding any point to his life. Rezia could be said to look on his behalf, but this attempt of course comes abruptly to an end when he kills himself, making the futility of her attempt clear to the reader. *Mrs. Dalloway* is an example of what one may be left with when traditional plotting is taken away – when there is no meaning-contributing delimitation, no reversal, no rescue – and may as such be very useful to illustrate the possible importance of traditional plotting to the appeal of characters.

Traditional plotting was certainly one of the "old tools" that Woolf refused to use; de Gay refers to Gualtieri who points out that to Woolf the novel "represented the possibility of experimenting with new forms and shapes,"²¹⁶ and it is interesting to remember that *Mrs. Dalloway* was born out of short-stories. Monica Girard has written an essay called "*Mrs. Dalloway: Genesis and Palimpsests*," in which she describes Woolf as "[taking] the 'seeds' imagined in her shorter fiction, re-plants them in new contexts and grows them differently."²¹⁷ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a consequence of fabricating a novel in this manner could easily result in more fragmentation than when it is initially planned as a whole. As Girard suggests, "[t]he novel grew day by day, week by week, so that the author lost control over the design of the original structural pattern."²¹⁸ This may serve to illustrate the

²¹⁶ Elena Gualtieri referred to by de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels...*, p. 1

²¹⁷ Girard, *Mrs Dalloway: Genesis and Palimpsests*, p. 1

²¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 3

importance of plot: Woolf's focus was most likely with character above all when writing her short-stories – a form that is particularly conducive to character-rendering. That the characters may have become less fascinating when “planted” into a novel may underpin the claim that in the novel, story and acts are decisive to the appeal of characters. As Scholes and Kellogg conclude: “Plot is only the indispensable skeleton which, fleshed out with character and incident, provides the necessary clay into which life may be breathed.”²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 239

6 Conclusion

In examining theories regarding the appeal of fictional characters as well as reflections on narration and plot, and comparing these to the situation in *Mrs. Dalloway*, possible shortcomings of modernist experimentation in fiction when it comes to the appeal of literary characters to the middlebrow reader have been demonstrated. So have the possible negative effects of features of modernism in general, such as pessimism, unsolvable problems, questions without answers, complexity, and so on. The question of what fascinates us in literary characters is one that concerns novel writers, among others, and it has been suggested here that by looking to the past and comparing the features of popular, more traditional novels now considered classics to those written by authors influenced by modernist ways of thinking, one should be able to make some assumptions regarding what appeals to the middlebrow reader and what does not. This claim rests on another claim, namely that modernist novelists in large part failed to captivate middlebrow readers, but rather appealed to a more highbrow audience. One of the reasons for this, it has been claimed here, is that the middlebrow audience looks for different qualities in a novel than do highbrow readers: to the middlebrow reader, the purpose of reading a novel seems to possibly be entertainment, above all else. It has been claimed that the novel historically has developed in line with the desires of the middlebrow reader for which it was initially intended, and that it consequently stands apart from other art forms in that the features that a novel should embody are significantly different from those desired in other art forms, such as the essay, the short-story, and painting. The middlebrow reader seems to be somewhat reluctant to do a great deal of interpretation of his own – it has for example been suggested that a guiding, authorial voice may be what the middlebrow reader prefers. The middlebrow reader seems to wish to be entertained by a story featuring action, development, conflicts, and change, among other features. The realism often depicted by modernist novelists is not conducive in this regard; a focus on actions on the part of the characters – actions that may be improbable in the real world – seems to be more captivating.

It has been claimed that the traditional style of plotting commonly found in *Bildungsroman* may be the most conducive in terms of making characters appealing to the middlebrow reader. This is in part due to the showing of character development over a

delimited time span with such features as tension, conflict, reversal, and change – the focus is on significant acts in the characters’ lives, and it has been suggested earlier that the middlebrow reader wishes to believe in the meaningfulness of acts and the possibility of change. The pessimism and distrust of act and the rejection of the meaningfulness of time were features that modernist novelists often let come to expression in their novels, something which may have been exactly the opposite of what the middlebrow reader – used to reading novels in which the authors in large part possessed all the “solutions” and answers to the problems ailing the characters – desires when reading fiction. A plot without beginning, middle, and end could stifle meaningful change and easily leaves the characters suffering from an “indeterminacy of meaning and relation,”²²⁰ a situation that could leave any reader with a feeling of frustration and hopelessness. For as suggested above, fiction and life are closely intertwined, and reading fiction may provide the reader with reassurance that life has meaning in power of purposeful acts carried out in accordance with meaningful morality – a morality that the reader may want to have reinforced by the narrative voice.

Moreover, in examining Vermeule’s theories around the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis, the notion that social information is key to understanding what characters fascinate the middlebrow reader was suggested. Novels which allow for active engagement of the reader’s mind reading capacities seems to be desirable, as well as a notion of resolution and equilibrium when the reading has been completed – something which modernist novelists usually refused to provide. Moreover, we have seen that there are indications that middlebrow readers wish to read about characters or issues somewhat relevant to their own lives, at least if Vermeule’s simulation theory and strategy testing as a motivation for reading fiction holds true. When modernist writers set out to convey social criticism, they often did so to point to shortcomings on the level of society and state, rather than criticize for example moral decay on a personal level, as had been the norm in earlier novels. One of the effects of this may have been to leave the reader with a feeling of hopelessness, as well as alienating him and depriving him of social information more relevant to his own reality. This type of information, it has been claimed, is what the reader needs in order to exercise his Machiavellian intelligence. The lack of social information on the level of character, combined with the lack of heroes and villains, may frustrate the Machiavellian mind, which craves tension and characters with which to ally. One may conclude that the middlebrow reader reads for social information, not social criticism.

²²⁰ Caserio, *Plot, Story...*, p. 93

In her essays “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” Woolf expresses her opinions on how one should go about writing novels and render characters. Not all of her opinions have been agreed to here, but several of them have, and it is interesting that she in *Mrs. Dalloway* failed to fully follow her own prescriptions. From emphatically claiming in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” that characters are interesting in themselves and should be focused on rather than “preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire,”²²¹ she went on to writing a novel in which the focus is to a large extent on politics and the ills of society. Not only does she describe the ills of society in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she also spends ample time describing Septimus’ illness; an aspect of character on which she discouraged focus in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” In describing such peculiar characters she seems also to have failed to provide the reader with “something which he recognizes,”²²² and consequently alienating him. Moreover, in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” she criticized “the screen-making habit,”²²³ and yet she put up such effective screens around her characters. It was suggested that she may have done this to demonstrate the perils of the screens, but if this is true, we are back to the conclusion that she failed to follow her own advice not to focus on factors extraneous to character. She could then be said to have attempted to “do” something with the novel other than conveying characters that are interesting in and by themselves. This phenomenon can be found in other novels considered modernist, where for example realism and social criticism are aspects highly focused on, something which is a paradox when considering the prevailing “art for art’s sake” approach among modernist writers.

There are ample indications that Woolf wished to appeal to the middlebrow reader above all, but it seems that she may have failed to recognize that in deviating so much from the literary past by introducing such a large extent of new features, she may have alienated this particular audience. Woolf and other modernist novelists may have been more successful in their appeal to the middlebrow readers by reflecting more on how the novel developed, as well as the interests of the audience to which they wished to appeal. Middlebrow readers had through time cherished novels for their entertainment value as well as the moral guidelines and sense of equilibrium offered. This was something which Woolf’s characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* largely failed to provide. The pervasive pessimism, realism, and focus on thoughts

²²¹ Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, p. 4

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 8

²²³ Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway...*, p. 21

and feelings to the abandonment of traditional plot featuring purposeful action as a provider of development and meaningfulness in the characters' lives made *Mrs. Dalloway* a narrative for the few rather than the many to which Woolf seemed to wish to appeal. When it comes to the art of character creation and appeal to the middlebrow reader, Woolf and other modernist novelists may have benefited from employing more of the criticized "old tools" of their predecessors, such as plot, conflict, morality, and solutions. Fortunately, their experimentation may serve to provide contemporary and future novelists with a greater understanding of the art of character creation when the desired audience is that of the middlebrow readers.

Bibliography

- Bradshaw, David, "Introduction" in Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Caserio, Robert L., *Plot, Story, and the Novel. From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979)
- de Gay, Jane, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2006)
- Dickens, Charles, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg (NY: Norton & Company, Inc 1999)
- Eysteinnsson, Astradur and Vivian Liska, *Modernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007)
- Gemzøe, Anker, "Modernism, Narrativity and Bakhtinian Theory" in *Modernism* vol. 1, ed. by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 125-141
- Girard, Monica, *Mrs. Dalloway: Genesis and Palimpsests*. Speech given at conference at the University of Lyon, France (date unknown). PDF transcript:
http://www.google.no/#hl=no&output=search&client=psy-ab&q=monica+girard+mrs+dalloway:+genesis+and+&oq=monica+girard+mrs+dalloway:+genesis+and+&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&gs_nf=1&gs_l=hp.12...830.9719.0.12454.39.38.0.1.1.0.289.6046.0j30j8.39.0.Byl8HcF3YJQ&pbx=1&bav=on.2.or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.,cf.osb&fp=cc7a7d71db642612&biw=1080&bih=534
[Accessed 29 April 2012]
- Greenblatt, Stephen and M. H. Abrams, "The Twentieth Century and After" in *The Norton Anthology: English Literature eighth edition* vol. 2, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 1827-1847
- Hawthorn, Jeremy, *Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway: A Study in Alienation* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975)
- Keen, Suzanne, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Luckhurst, Nicola, "Introduction" in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 1-18
- Mozejko, Edward, "Tracing the Modernist Paradigm" in *Modernism* vol. 1, ed. by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 14-33
- Rodier, Carole, "The French Reception of Woolf: An *État Présent* of *Études Woolfiennes*" in

The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe, ed. Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 39-53

Scholes, Robert and Kellogg, Robert, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966)

Vermeule, Blakey, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010)

Wicht, Wolfgang, "Installing Modernism: The Reception of Virginia Woolf in the German Democratic Republic" in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 102-126

Woolf, Virginia, "Modern Fiction" in *The Norton Anthology: English Literature* vol. 2, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 2087-2092

----- "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown" in *Collected Essays* vol. 1, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1966) pp. 319-337

----- *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Zwerdling, Alex: *Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System* in PMLA, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Modern Language Association, 1977). URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461415> [Accessed 29 April 2011]

