Dorothy Richardson

**Thumbnail Definition:**



*Dorothy Richardson.*

Dorothy Richardson (17 May 1873 – 17 June 1957) was an English writer who pioneered experimental modernist prose. Her major work was *Pilgrimage*, a thirteen volume narrative. The first part or ‘Chapter-volume’, *Pointed Roofs*,was published in 1915. A Collected Edition, containing the twelfth chapter *Dimple Hill*, was published in 1938. The unfinished, thirteenth chapter, *March Moonlight*, was published posthumously as part of a new Collected Edition in 1967. *Pilgrimage* is narrated exclusively through the consciousness of its heroine, Miriam Henderson. The technique is challenging for the reader, who is given little by way of context or the familiar reference points of nineteenth-century realism. For Richardson, however, it opened the way to a new ‘feminine realism’, where Miriam’s identity is not bound by the demands of marriage or family. The result is an open-ended, unfinished, and perhaps unfinishable, text, which is as significant in the history of women’s writing as it is for the history of twentieth-century literature. In the 1920s, Richardson’s work was routinely cited alongside James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Her reputation declined after 1945, but revived with second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, critical interest in Richardson criticism has grown steadily, and she now has an established place in the modernist canon.

**Main Entry:**

Richardson left school at 17 when her father got into financial difficulties, and worked as a teacher, a governess, and then a receptionist in a dental surgery. These experiences became the basis for *Pilgrimage*. Between 1908 and 1914, she wrote a series of short descriptive sketches for the *Saturday Review*, which she called ‘middles’. These experiments in prose represent her first attempts to develop a new form of writing that could represent the modern consciousness of a young independent woman at the turn of the century.

The first draft of *Pointed Roofs* was begun in 1912. It was recognised by the publisher’s reader, Edward Garnett, as an example of ‘feminine impressionism’, a description that aligned it closely with the work of Joseph Conrad, whom Richardson admired. An earlier antecedent is Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* (1883), one of the first examples of New Woman fiction, which challenged the both the form and the content of the Victorian marriage plot. As a young woman, Richardson engaged closely with the ideas of contemporary feminists such as Schreiner and Charlotte Perkins Gilman and, after 1906, she started to develop her own feminist critiques in her journalism.

The publication date of *Pointed Roofs*,in the second year of the First World War, was unfortunate, as the text narrates Miriam’s experience as a teacher in a German school; but despite poor sales Richardson’s work quickly gained critical recognition. *Pilgrimage* was the first work of literature about which the phrase ‘stream of consciousness’ was used, by May Sinclair in April 1918. Richardson herself disliked the description, objecting to the word ‘stream’ as too linear. She preferred to think of consciousness as a ‘pool’, an ‘ocean’, or a fountain, metaphors that better convey her immersive aesthetic, where the reader is plunged with Miriam into a world of sensation, the meaning of which can only gradually be inferred.

*Pilgrimage*’s contribution to a feminine aesthetic was also recognised early. Virginia Woolf described Richardson as the inventor of the ‘psychological sentence of the feminine gender’. However, the gender politics of *Pilgrimage* is much more complicated than the promotion of a pre-existing idea of feminine experience. Miriam’s sense of herself is always in process, and contradictory. In *Honeycomb* (1917), she reacts so strongly to conventional middle-class femininity that she decides that she hates women. In the later ‘Chapter-volumes’, she starts to develop a critique of masculinity and a theory of women’s art, but her own identity is always positioned ambivalently between the poles of masculinity and femininity.

Miriam’s sexuality is as fluid as her gender identity and since Joanne Winning’s ground-breaking study (2000), *Pilgrimage* has started to be recognised as an example of ‘Sapphic modernism’. The girls’ school in *Pointed Roofs* is infused with an unarticulated homoeroticism and Miriam, as well as several attachments to men, has at least two close relationships with women. Always unwilling to be pinned down, however, she struggles to keep her independence, preferring a kind of queer sociality where she positions herself in a triangular relationship between two significant others rather than in a fixed relationship with either a man or a woman.

Richardson lived and worked in central London and the city is so important to *Pilgrimage* as to be almost a character in its own right; but although her networks were extensive, Richardson was not part of the Bloomsbury Group. She had an intimate relationship with H.G. Wells, who encouraged her to write. She had close associations with feminist, pacificist, anarchist, and socialist groups and never lost her commitment to alternative ways of living. A few years later she was attracted to Quakerism. In the 1920s, she was part of several avant-garde groups, including the H.D. circle, which she knew through her patron Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman).

The often-cited difficulty of Richardson’s text can be a barrier for the reader, but may also be an opportunity. Richardson was critical of the novel as a ‘conducted tour’. She wanted the reader to be a collaborator in the creation of meaning rather than a passive consumer of the narrative. Critics were quick to recognise that *Pilgrimage* was doing something new, but have often found its complexity frustrating. Readers have been greatly helped by Gloria Fromm’s biography (1977), George H. Thomson’s *Reader’s Guide* (1996),and his *Notes* (1999). A *Selected Letters* was published in 1995, but detailed textual scholarship is still ongoing.

Richardson has now been restored to her original position as one of the great innovators of twentieth-century prose. Her shorter fiction, essays, and journalism have begun to receive critical attention. While still a challenging writer, in the twenty-first-century she has finally found the audience she deserves.

**References and further reading:**

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