Close reading Assignment #3

Throughout her essay, Virginia Woolf tries to identify the difference between the way “Georgian” and “Edwardian” authors describe their characters. She claims that, around December of 1910, the very fabric of society evolved and as a result, an enigmatic and irreversible change was made to the method in which authors communicate characters to their audiences. Though this was not the first great change of literary ages and certainly not the last, Woolf felt that a clear distinction must be made between the two styles. Woolf stated that the fading generation of the Edwardians relied upon the convention of systematically building a detailed and intricate world around the character, while Georgians focused more specifically upon the character itself. Investigating these elements, Woolf’s essay aims to ascertain the differences in the ways that Edwardian and Georgian authors bring their characters to life.

In the very beginning of the essay Arnold Bennett is quoted, saying that, “The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else...”, going on to make the point that, above all, characters must be real, true, and convincing. Woolf quickly makes the point that writers are not especially talented or unique beings, but that they are merely the ones who *realize* when they are observing, discerning, or calculating a remote character. She claims that, as a writer, she possesses a naturally inquisitive spirit that whispers, “What if?” into her ear as every detail is taken in. These propositions, coupled with the shifting dynamics of relationships within society, set the foundation for Woolf’s discourse of character analysis. This Modus Operandi is then applied to a woman that Woolf has met in passing, who we come to know as Mrs. Brown.

Woolf happened upon Mrs. Brown when rushing to catch a train that she was late for, stumbling into a carriage that already contained two passengers. In a way it was almost as if Woolf had been dropped into the world of a book, and found herself staring face-to-face with a fictitious character. She begins with a physical description of Mrs. Brown, telling of her extremely meticulous neatness and rather small form. This flows into an observation about her mannerisms and behaviors, casually describing a hint of a condescending tone to her voice and how she silently cowers before the man sitting across from her. From here Woolf begins to listen to the “What if?” voice in her head, extrapolating reasons for Mrs. Brown being the way that she is based on the very little that she can immediately deduce. Though Woolf has no way of knowing these things to be certain, she infers, considers, and in short, allows her to fathom Mrs. Brown “doing Heaven knows what.” It is this technique, this method that so separates the Edwardians and Georgians.

Woolf suggests that an Edwardian, such as Mr. Wells or Mr. Bennett himself, might tell you all about the world surrounding the character and hope that, as a result, you would have a clearer mental picture of their character. Over time, the British reading public was slated to believe people existed as an extension or piece of the world around them, and not as a realm of their own. However Woolf claims that these worlds, no matter how fastidiously they are articulated to us, cannot be the basis for the characters within them. The process must begin from the other end. The characters should be the lens through which we view the fictional worlds that they occupy, not the other way around. Their place within said world should be clearly shown if the author is able to make their characters *seem* natural by exhibiting everyday actions, flaws, and oddities. Authors should use their characters to draw the reader into the novel, naturally becoming more and more intimate with the novel as the readers imagination is stimulated. Even the stubborn English public, who cling so desperately to the ways of the past, will eventually realize the appropriateness of the Georgians and latch onto their writing. By presenting realistic characters that reflect the reality of life itself, Woolf claims that the Georgian approach to character description should replace the outdated Edwardian method.

On page 46 of Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf exemplifies the method that she so strongly advocates. In this passage Woolf is able to convey the confusing and tension-filled emotions that hover between Clarissa and Peter. This is achieved simply by describing Peter’s casual movement about the room, and detailing Clarissa’s silent, reactive thoughts to it. Peter has risen from the couch where the two of them sat, and now stares out the window, absent-mindedly air drying his bandanna handkerchief. By creating a space between himself and Clarissa, and turning his back to her, we can almost *feel* Peter’s need to calm himself down emotionally by momentarily closing himself off. We take a moment to imagine the myriad of confusing thoughts that course through his head, and generate his body’s nervous tick. Woolf tells us that his coat is lifted ever so gently by his shoulder-blades, giving an extremely vivid if not uncommon image for the reader to grasp. He blows his nose “violently”, and you can hear the silence in the room being shattered. All this while Clarissa has remained seated on the couch, watching Peter as he stands engulfed in his thoughts. A mental tangent of her own is described; She imagines Peter setting out on a great voyage, and silently begs him to bring her along. Hidden within her is a desire to rewrite the past, to escape the life that she knows and has recently begun to question. She continues to imagine, thinking of her fictitious life with Peter as a five act play. Though these acts are not described, we as the reader can perhaps supplement a scene or two from our own imagination. By allowing the reader this small insight into Clarissa’s thoughts, Woolf has forced the reader to consider their own feelings on the rather tricky relationship at hand. Woolf has given us two entire worlds within these characters thoughts and actions, drawing us closer to them as we empathize or sympathize with their conditions. In this way, she adheres to the Georgian method of using characters *as* the building blocks for the world around them, not the other way around.