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## WHEN “HUMAN CHARACTER CHANGED”: 1910 AND NATIONAL DISCOURSE

### Introduction

In her 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, Virginia Woolf famously asserted that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” (Woolf, 1924: 4). Heralding the advent of modernism in the history of British literature and art, this assertion has provided a useful chronological protocol in modernist studies. However, Woolf’s choice of year (1910) and subject (character) surpasses both its literary and art historical contexts, and invites perspectives from Britain’s political history and national discourse. This article explores Woolf’s assertion alongside a reshaping of the British political landscape between 1910 and 1924, paying further attention to a robust emphasis on continuity during said period. It contends that, much as a leftward turn in British politics catalysed Woolf’s representation of character, she dissented from national discourse for the sake of a new subjectivity.

### Change in human character in critical reflection

“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” evolved as a lecture, which Woolf delivered to the Heretics Society in Cambridge and published under the title “Character in Fiction” in *The Criterion*, a journal edited by T. S. Eliot, in July 1924. The essay responds to Arnold Bennett’s charge against contemporary writers, such as D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot, whose characters ostensibly lack reality (Woolf, 1924: 3). Woolf not only challenges Bennett’s notion of reality and his licence to judge it, but also proposes to separate the writers of Bennett’s generation (H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy) from those belonging to her own (E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and herself) (Woolf, 1924: 4). The fault-lines between Edwardians and Georgians demarcate the difference in the representation of character. According to Woolf, the Edwardians frequently place character in secondary importance to “an enormous stress upon the fabric of things”

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(Woolf, 1924: 18). The Georgians, in turn, grapple with the need to overcome their predecessors' inadequacies before developing the tools of their own. Throughout her essay, Woolf uses the example of a Mrs. Brown, an impoverished sixty-year-old woman whom she allegedly observed on a train journey from Richmond to Waterloo. For Woolf, Mrs. Brown conveys an elusive "oddity and significance" (Woolf, 1924: 20), and the future of English literature will depend on the representation of this new subjectivity. As Woolf pleads, "we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown" (Woolf, 1924: 24).

In examining Woolf's assertion about the change in human character, critics have traced it to the exhibition of Post-Impressionist art held in London between November 1910 and January 1911. Organized by Roger Fry, the exhibition came as a shock to the British public, unprepared to appreciate the work of Édouard Manet, Georges Seurat, Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, and Paul Cézanne. In *Edwardian Occasions: Essays on English Writing in the Early Twentieth Century* (1972), Samuel Hynes has dubbed the event "the radical change of consciousness", particularly visible in the different form and structure of representation (Hynes, 1972: 4). For Peter Stansky, the exhibition marked Britain's entry into "the story of a modernism that since the turn of the century had had a number of its events occur on the Continent" (Stansky, 1996: 1). Historically, this entry coincided with the death of King Edward VII, which brought the preceding era to a symbolic close. In *Modernist Fiction* (1992), Randall Stevenson has reminded us that Woolf made her assertion in "a turbulent time of agitation by trade unions, by the Home Rule movement in Ireland, and – probably most significantly for Woolf – by the Suffragettes, in many violent demonstrations on the streets of London" (Stevenson, 1998: 65). According to Stevenson, the representation of character turned inward, when extant British hierarchies and divisions became increasingly more precarious (Stevenson, 1998: 65). In his "Introduction" to a special volume of *Literature and History* (2013), Matthew Creasy highlights "a mixture of equivocation and judicious caution about pinning down a point of momentous historical change", which evidences itself in Woolf's unconventional use of grammar and syntax (Creasy, 2013: 3). Indeed, the

temporal clause “on or about December 1910” avoids stating a date to sanction the occurrence of “on” and, in doing so, violates the normative usage of “in” before a month. Woolf’s indeterminate chronology becomes a point of reference for other contributors to the volume. They expand on further cultural and historical events that took place in 1910 and included debates surrounding the Romantic-Classical divide, the Vatican’s reaction against heresy in the form of “The Oath against Modernism” (1910), and a re-emergence of the “invasion trope” in the face of a newly pending German threat. In *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (2014), Laura Marcus questions the attempts to construe Woolf’s assertion in reference to events; instead, she proposes to account for the writer’s emphasis on character as an impression (Marcus, 2014: 134). Marcus links the idea of change to how Woolf conceives of the creation of character. It starts with an impression from experience and afterwards translates into an impression of a smaller printing press, similar to The Hogarth Press run by Woolf’s husband Leonard (Marcus, 2014: 136). By this logic, Woolf grounds character in the new cultural production, more accommodating to the impression of subjectivity.

Even though extant research provides invaluable critical insight into the arrival of modernism and rupture with the earlier modes of representation, it remains largely mute about the significance of 1910 in Britain’s political history and national discourse. Since Woolf proposed the change in human character in retrospect, she could be especially perceptive to a reconfiguration of the British political landscape, which happened between 1910 and 1924, and installed the Labour Party in government. Additionally, Woolf’s endorsement of a different representation of character testifies to a contemporary shift in national discourse, marked by the emergence of an introspective type of subjectivity. In what follows, this article contextualizes national discourse in the historical moment of 1910 and beyond, and considers the pertinence of political change to that in human character.

### **Continuity and change of national discourse**

National discourse has been the subject of a number of identity studies that appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s. Among the more seminal interventions, one should mention *Literary Englands: Versions of “Englishness” in Modern Writing* (1993) by David Gervais, *Landscape*

*and Englishness* (1998) by David Matless, *Englishness and National Culture* (1999) by Anthony Easthope, *Identity of England* (2002) by Robert Colls, and *The Making of English National Identity* (2003) by Krishan Kumar. Collectively, these studies seek “to define a national style”, as fuzzy as such a category may be (Mandler, 2001: 120). In *The Politics of Englishness* (2007), Arthur Aughey has lifted the idea of national identity to a level where it becomes at once the intrinsic and mutable quality of a political process. In his words, “Englishness is indeed a construct, though not a product of the moment, and its political arrangements are not permanent fixtures, but ones that are modifiable by circumstance and by will” (Aughey, 2007: 10). Aughey avoids searching for Englishness in “the discussion of absolutely everything” (Aughey, 2007: 6). This approach implies that national discourse can be gleaned from Britain’s political history.

British national discourse has its origins in the political enterprise to forge a British state, a United Kingdom, which reaches back to the 1707 Act of Union between the Kingdom of England and Kingdom of Scotland. Since its gestation, the British state has retained a stronghold in England, which, being the largest, most populous, and economically dominant part of the UK, has taken on the role of a normative linchpin for things British, be it the royal family, British English, British citizenship, or – historically – Protestantism and the British Empire. Perhaps, following the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms in the late 1980s, the “consciousness of Britain” is no longer “predominantly English” (Grainger, 1986: 53). However, despite the devolutionary processes in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, English attitudes prevail over Scottish and Northern Irish sentiments, as became evident in the Brexit referendum of 2016 (“UK Votes”, 2016). English hegemony infects British national discourse and “serves the integrity, continuity, and power structures of the British polity” (Shadurski, 2020: 182).

Burkean conservatism lies at the foundation of British national discourse. Formulated by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event* (1790), this ideology denigrates revolution

and foreign influence, while at the same time upholding English institutions as guarantors of liberty. Burke valorised continuity, inscribed in Magna Carta and the 1689 Bill of Rights, and opposed the prospect of any disruptive change: “By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer” (Burke, 1983: 193). Burke’s investment in continuity and generational links signals an important organizing principle of national discourse. This principle overlaps with what is known as Whig historiography, a version of history in which social progress equals a slow and halting working-out of long-lasting emancipatory reforms, rather than revolutions (Shadurski, 2020: 33). Founded on Burkean conservatism, national discourse allows a degree of innovation, as long as the continuity of existing power structures remains unchallenged.

The year 1910 marked a milestone in the transformation of British national discourse. In *The Condition of England* (1909), Charles F. G. Masterman provides a longer-term perspective on the ongoing process, diagnosing it through reference to the English landscape. He observes: “A few generations ago [...] England was the population of the English countryside: ‘the rich man in his castle’, ‘the poor man at his gate’; the feudal society of country house, country village, and little country town, in a land whose immense wealth still slept undisturbed. But no one today would seek in the ruined villages and dwindling population of the countryside the spirit of an ‘England’ four-fifths of whose people have now crowded into the cities. The little red-roofed towns and hamlets, the labourer in the fields at noontide or evening, the old English service in the old English village church, now stand but as the historical survival of a once great and splendid past” (Masterman, 1909: 13). For Masterman, modernity has triggered the curtailment of aristocrat-peasant relationships, manifest in the decomposition of age-old certainties. Recorded on the eve of 1910, his anxiety laments the continuing change in the political landscape.

Unlike Masterman's, Woolf's view of the scale of change takes on a less minatory and somewhat more precocious dimension. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", she admits: "All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910" (Woolf, 1924: 5). Written from the vantage point of 1924, Woolf's overview of a wholesale social shift registers a reconfiguration of the British political landscape that took more than a year to complete. Between 1868 and 1918, the UK Liberal Party ruled the country almost single-handedly, carrying the banner of continuity in the name of the freeborn Englishman. However, the Liberals hit a dead end in 1910, when they could not act convincingly on the limitation of upper-class privilege, Irish Home Rule, women's rights, and the creation of a welfare state. In *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935), George Dangerfield demonstrates the remit of the party's crisis in 1910: "before them stood a barrier of Capital which they dared not attack. Behind them stood the House of Lords" (Dangerfield, 1997: 21). Still failing to enfranchise all women over the aged of 21 in 1918, the Liberals stayed in office as part of a coalition government. Eventually, they were voted out in 1924, when, following the seismic gains at the ballot box between 1910 and 1924, Labour obtained a parliamentary majority and assumed government (Shadurski, 2020: 34, 98).

However, the Liberals' demission did not pose a significant challenge to British national discourse. In *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924* (1998), Paul Ward shows that Labour espoused the parliamentary system of government as "the sole legitimate vehicle for the advance of socialism" (Ward, 1998: 5). Additionally, the party relied heavily on the vocabulary of continuity, which allowed them "to brand anarchism, Marxism and syndicalism as foreign" (Ward, 1998: 197). In this context, Woolf's appreciation of a thoroughgoing social shift was largely sanguine, while British national discourse proved highly robust and adaptable to a new political landscape. Yet an inchoate leftward turn in British politics enabled Woolf to identify 1910 as a watershed in the representation of character.

### Character and national discourse

Further to referencing the year 1910, Woolf invested change in “human character”. Her choice of words evokes the English character, an idiom commonly used by British writers and commentators between the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. In *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (2006), Peter Mandler has established that the idiom of character emerged in the work of nineteenth-century public moralists. John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold had come to think of their audiences in terms of a “psychologically homogeneous unit”, the “nation” (Mandler, 2006: 26). With the expansion of public education and readership in the late nineteenth century in Britain, the English character supplied a model for moderation, inventiveness, reasonableness, and confidence in British imperial superiority. However, the failures of Britain’s civilizing mission in South Africa and Ireland refocused the idiom of character from the bombast of empire to the domesticities of daily life; in other words, the character of an outgoing Great Briton morphed into that of an introspective Little Englander. The First World War renewed the relevance of the English character to the unity of the British nation in times of turmoil. The interwar years saw a resurgence of self-celebratory accounts of British exceptionalism: unlike his European counterparts, the Englishman shunned extremes and stood for liberty (Shadurski, 2020: 41, 43-44).

In her assessment of how “human character changed”, Woolf transcribes at once a familiarity with national discourse and an intention to overcome it. She opens her essay by illustrating the change through the character of a cook: “The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow *The Daily Herald*, and now to ask advice about a hat” (Woolf, 1924: 5). Shown to arise from her subterranean existence, Woolf’s cook assumes increased social visibility, alongside a whole domestic sphere which she represents. Since Woolf allows the cook to embody change, she not only transgresses extant hierarchies of representation, but also dissents from national discourse, centred on a privileged middle-class

male character. In his pre-Revolution article “Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?” (“Uderzhat li bol’sheviki gosudarstvennuu vlast’”, 1917), Vladimir Lenin also uses the example of a cook to explain the aspirations of a proletarian government: “We know that any unskilled worker and any cook are not yet able to take on the task of administering a state. [...] We demand that training in the work of state administration should be conducted by class-conscious workers and soldiers and that this training should begin immediately [...]” (Lenin, 1969: 315). Despite becoming a proverbial slogan that “Every cook must learn to administer a state”, Lenin’s original remark stipulates a condition in which, regardless of their class and gender, all workers receive representation in a Bolshevik state. In Lenin, the cook epitomizes the outcome of a revolution and a beginning of a new political and socioeconomic order. In Woolf, the cook only initiates a long and halting process of emancipation. She stands in a complex dual relationship to national discourse: her emergence both challenges and ensures the continuity of the British state.

Woolf’s response to national discourse presupposes the suspension of certainties pertaining, primarily, to gender, status, and class. Woolf draws on the diminishment of the British imperial project, urging the novelists “to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire [...]” (Woolf, 1924: 9). Mrs. Brown, the central character of Woolf’s essay, marks a break in the representation of character, precisely because she exists in experience, rather than being modelled on a type. Her introspection signals an affinity with the English character; yet unlike the idiomatic Englishman, Mrs. Brown does not epitomize either a Great Briton or a Little Englander. She has no membership of a men-only club and partakes of no “‘God-given’ mission” of the British Empire (Kumar, 2003: 196); her class belonging is a matter of conjecture and shifting circumstance. Through Mrs. Brown, Woolf abandons the idiom of character and renegotiates national discourse. Her representation of character commits itself to a more diverse human subjectivity.

### **Conclusion and coda: 2020 and British exceptionalism**

For Woolf, 1910 witnessed a major shift in the representation of character. Woolf’s political insight permitted her to associate that shift with an incipient direction in British politics, which resulted in

the first Labour government in 1924, the year when “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” was published. The reconfiguration of the British political landscape occurred simultaneously with electoral reform and other emancipatory movements, which put pressures on national discourse and the idiom of character. Woolf treated both with ambivalence, utilizing each as a point of reference and rupture. Her characters of a cook and Mrs. Brown not only arise from under the weight of the middle-class male-dominated English character, but also break free from its nuanced hierarchies and privilege. This ambivalence leads back to the discursive idea of continuity as a gradual and long-lasting process of emancipation. At the same time, the new subjectivity of Woolf’s characters purports to embrace a wider range of human features than the stratifying constraints of national discourse could allow.

Woolf’s politically motivated humanization of character retains acute significance nowadays. When Boris Johnson, the UK Prime Minister, announced the closure of pubs, clubs, and restaurants in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, he re-invoked the clichés of the English character: “We’re taking away the ancient, inalienable right of free-born people of the United Kingdom to go to the pub. [...] I know how difficult it is, how it seems to go against the freedom-loving instincts of the British people” (quoted in O’Toole, 2020). In emphasizing liberty as an ancient birth right, Johnson’s address not only elides a whole political history of emancipation in Britain, but also ignores the fact that a large portion of British population were born outside the UK. This stance bespeaks an unfortunate failure to desert national discourse and look beyond British exceptionalism to a wider humanity. Human character may have changed “on or about December 1910”, as Woolf asserted. However, the trappings of British national discourse, including the idiom of character, remain in place in 2020.

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### Анотація

#### **М. Шадурський. Коли «людський характер змінився»: 1910 рік і національний дискурс**

У своєму есе «Містер Беннет і Міссіс Браун» (1924) Вірджинія Вулф стверджує, що «приблизно від грудня 1910 року людський характер змінився». Це відоме висловлювання стало провісником початку епохи модернізму в англійській літературі та мистецтві, пізніше – історичним маркером. Проте, проблематика цього есе Вулф не вичерпується літературознавчим чи мистецтвознавчим контекстом. Не зважаючи на чисельність інтерпретаційних, біографічних та історичних праць, науковці не брали до уваги вплив політичної історії Великобританії і національного дискурсу на це твердження письменниці. Оскільки Вулф визначила зміни у зображенні характеру ретроспективно, її висловлювання вказує на зміни в політичному ландшафті Великобританії, що відбувалися між 1910 та 1924-ми роками і тягли за собою прихід до влади Лейбористської партії. Окрім цього, схвалення Вулф щодо іншого зображення характеру свідчить про зміну акцентів у національному дискурсі того часу, котрий проявився у появі інтроспективного типу суб'єктивності. Дана стаття пропонує контекстуальне прочитання твердження Вулф на історичному тлі 1910-х років, беручи до уваги взаємозв'язок зміни характеру з політичними трансформаціями того часу. Спершу автор статті аналізує, як намічений перехід до правління лівих сил в британській політиці дозволив Вулф позначити 1910-й рік як вододіл у зображенні характеру. Автор стверджує, що британський національний дискурс з його ідеєю континуальності британської держави одночасно обмежує і каталізує способи зображення. Зокрема, автор зосереджується на тому, наскільки двоїстими є характери, створені самою письменницею, – кухарка і міссіс Браун – по відношенню до національного дискурсу. У заключній частині статті автор доходить висновку, що Вулф переосмислює національний дискурс і ставить зображення характеру в зв'язок з різноманіттям людської суб'єктивності.

**Ключові слова:** характер, зображення, національний дискурс, політична історія Великобританії, Вірджинія Вулф, 1910 рік.

### Аннотация

#### **М. Шадурский. Когда «человеческий характер изменился»: 1910 год и национальный дискурс**

В своем эссе «Мистер Беннет и миссис Браун» (1924) Вирджиния Вулф заявила, что «где-то в декабре 1910 года человеческий характер

изменился». Это знаменитое высказывание предвестило начало эпохи модернизма в английской литературе и искусстве, а также впоследствии стало служить хронологическим маркером. Однако проблемы эссе Вулф не исчерпываются литературоведческим и искусствоведческим контекстом, и несмотря на обилие интерпретационных, биографических и исторических работ отсутствует понимание влияния политической истории Великобритании и национального дискурса на заявление писательницы. Поскольку Вулф определила изменение в изображении характера в ретроспективе, ее высказывание свидетельствует о меняющемся политическом ландшафте в Великобритании, которое имело место между 1910 и 1924 годами и влекло за собой приход Лейбористской партии к власти. Помимо этого, одобрение Вулф иного изображения характера говорит о современном ей сдвиге в национальном дискурсе, который сопровождался появлением интроспективного типа субъективности. Данная статья осуществляет контекстуальное прочтение заявления Вулф на историческом фоне 1910-х годов, обращая внимание на взаимосвязь изменений характера с политическими переменами. Статья анализирует, как наметившийся переход к правлению левого толка в британской политике позволил Вулф обозначить 1910 год в качестве водораздела в изображении характера. Обсуждается то, каким образом британский национальный дискурс, фокусирующийся на идее преемственности британского государства, одновременно ограничивает и катализирует способы изображения. Статья показывает, что характеры, созданные самой Вулф, – кухарка и миссис Браун – находятся в сложном двойственном отношении к национальному дискурсу. В статье заключается, что Вулф переосмысливает национальный дискурс, ставя изображение характера в неразрывную связь с многообразием человеческой субъективности.

**Ключевые слова:** характер, изображение, национальный дискурс, политическая история Великобритании, Вирджиния Вулф, 1910 год.

### Abstract

#### **M. Shadurski. When “Human Character Changed”: 1910 and National Discourse**

Virginia Woolf famously asserted that “on or about December 1910 human character changed”. Featured in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, this assertion heralded the advent of modernism in the history of British literature and art; it also provided a useful chronological protocol in modernist studies. However, Woolf’s choice of year (1910) and subject (character) surpasses both its literary and art historical contexts. Even though extant research provides

invaluable critical insight into Woolf's essay, it remains largely mute about the significance of 1910 in Britain's political history and national discourse. Since Woolf proposed the change in human character in retrospect, her assertion testifies to a reshaping of the British political landscape, which happened between 1910 and 1924, and installed the Labour Party in government. Additionally, Woolf's endorsement of a different representation of character overlaps with a contemporary shift in national discourse, marked by the emergence of an introspective type of subjectivity. This article provides a contextual reading of Woolf's assertion against the period's historical background, and considers the pertinence of political change to that in human character. It examines how an inchoate leftward turn in British politics permitted Woolf to identify 1910 as a watershed in how character was represented. This analysis is followed by a discussion of how British national discourse, with its emphasis on the continuity of the British state, at once limits and catalyses the representation of character, which becomes evident in Woolf's portrayal of a cook and Mrs. Brown, who stand in a complex dual relationship to national discourse. The article contends that Woolf renegotiates national discourse, and her representation of character commits itself to a more diverse human subjectivity.

**Keywords:** character, representation, national discourse, British political history, Virginia Woolf, 1910.

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