

The artistic movement that took place in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries known as modernism is often defined by its deliberate divergence from classical and traditional forms. Modernists were very concerned with the idea of the new; they hoped to rearrange old words into new meanings, understand the world in new ways, and explore new ideas and concepts. The philosophical concept of subjectivity, which is associated with ideas of consciousness, authority, and reality, and refers to how individual, personal perceptions and beliefs can influence someone's judgement or view of the world, was one concept explored by modernists. Many modernist works were described as subjective or aimed to describe the subjective. Edward R. DeZurko wrote that 'the mere fact that subjectivity has characterized modern art up to the middle of the twentieth century would indicate that for this period subjectivity in art has best served some of man's deepest needs'¹. He explains that not only was subjectivity wildly used in modernist art, but that it reflected the people of the time. It is the purpose of this essay to assess the literary significance of subjectivity in modernism. In general, modernists seemed to view subjectivity as a challenge and a tool for truth-telling; they aimed to describe personal, subjective truths rather than accepted, objective ones. One example of subjectivity is in Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," when Gregor describes his feelings as a traveling salesman; "what a strenuous career it is that I've chosen! Travelling day in and day out. Doing business like this takes much more effort than doing your own business at home, and on top of that there's the curse of travelling, worries about making train connections, bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know anyone or become friendly with them. It can all go to Hell!"². Another example of this subjectivity, and the desire to portray one's subjective personal truth, is in Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own," when she states that 'I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought which led me to think this. Perhaps if I lay bare the ideas, the prejudices, that lie behind this statement you will find that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction'³. Woolf clearly illustrates her desire not only to explain her position, but to show how she arrived at it. In many ways, Woolf's entire essay is an exploration and depiction of subjectivity. In a wholly modernist way, Woolf begins her essay by explaining the topic she was asked to speak on and her conclusion before she begins outlining how she arrived at her opinion and explaining it in further detail. Woolf seems acutely aware of her own subjectivity and means to make her audience aware as well.

¹ DeZurko, Edward R. "Modernism and Subjectivity." *The Georgia Review* 23, no. 1 (1969): 17-30. Accessed April 23, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/41396517.

² Kafka, Franz. 2002. "Metamorphosis Franz Kafka," *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, trans. by David Wyllie <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm>> [accessed 24 April 2020]

³ Woolf, Virginia. 2002. "A Room of One's Own," *Project Gutenberg Australia* <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200791.txt>> [accessed 25 April 2020]

As subjectivity is woven into Woolf's essay, it is also woven into literary modernism as a whole. Subjectivity is inherently connected with most of the key features of modernism, however it is most related to modernist ideas of the unconscious and the process of representation. Modernists likely felt that they could not fully relay their own ideas or fully recreate the human psyche through characters without the use and examination of subjectivity. It appears that modernists believed the subjective truth was more true. They were aware that no idea exists on its own, without influence from the subjective experience of the person or people that thought of it. Thus, the main significance of subjectivity in literary modernism seems to be capturing and relaying this truth that is made more true through the lens of subjectivity. In Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," the subjectivity lies mainly in the character of Gregor Samsa. Kafka works to make Gregor a believable character with a unique attitude and perception of the world. Though the situation Gregor finds himself in is bizarre and fantastical, his reactions and thoughts are consistent to his character. The audience gains more from the story due to its subjectivity. Rather than just a story of a man that miraculously turns into some strange creature and later dies, "Metamorphosis" is more of a study of a man dedicated to his family, even when they may not deserve his dedication. An example of Gregor's commitment to his family is his willingness to provide for them monetarily. He is shown to be the financial provider for the family before his metamorphosis, working at a job he greatly dislikes in order to pay off his father's debts; 'Gregor's only concern at that time had been to arrange things so that they could all forget about it as quickly as possible. So then he started working especially hard, with a fiery vigour that raised him from a junior salesman to a travelling representative almost overnight, bringing with it the chance to earn money in quite different ways'⁴. Even after his bizarre transformation, Gregor is concerned for his family's financial situation rather than himself. Gregor is characterized throughout the narrative as selfless to a fault. For example, he is pleased with the news that his family had been keeping aside money that he earned rather than paying off their debts, despite the fact that Gregor was trapped in a job he was unhappy with in order to get the money for that purpose;

they had not been using up all the money that Gregor had been bringing home every month, keeping only a little for himself, so that that, too, had been accumulating. Behind the door, Gregor nodded with enthusiasm in his pleasure at this unexpected thrift and caution. He could actually have used this surplus money to reduce his father's debt to his boss, and the day when he could have freed himself from that job would have come much closer, but now it was certainly better the way his father had done things.⁵

This quote shows the way that Gregor perceives the situation. Through the lens of dedication to his family and possibly a lack of self-respect, Gregor reads the situation favorably, even while the narrator points out that Gregor would have been better off in a different situation and would be justified had he been upset. Another example of his unrelenting, and likely undeserved loyalty

⁴ Kafka, Franz. 2002. "Metamorphosis Franz Kafka," *Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka*, trans. by David Wyllie <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm>> [accessed 24 April 2020]

⁵ Ibid

to his family is that he almost wishes himself to die in the end, accepting the notion that he ‘must go away’ rather than further “inconvenience” his family;

He thought back of his family with emotion and love. If it was possible, he felt that he must go away even more strongly than his sister. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful rumination until he heard the clock tower strike three in the morning. He watched as it slowly began to get light everywhere outside the window too. Then, without his willing it, his head sank down completely, and his last breath flowed weakly from his nostrils.⁶

This acceptance of his family’s desire to get rid of him and their selfishness throughout the story as well as Gregor’s willingness to provide for them unconditionally reveals some of Gregor’s subjective truths. In Gregor’s eyes, it is the truth that he should provide for his family, the truth that he should love them despite their unappreciative and rude behavior, and the truth that he should go away now that he is an inconvenience to them. These are all beliefs that Gregor holds due to his experiences, unconscious and conscious desires, and everything else that shapes him as a person. From an outside perspective, one would likely argue that Gregor deserved better from his family. One would likely expect the father to work to pay off his own debts well before Gregor’s transformation. And, one would likely think that Gregor should be focused on the fact that he has become some inhuman creature rather than continue to focus on the family’s financial situation. However, as the story is told from a third-person limited point of view, with the narrator only reporting events that Gregor remembers, imagines, hears, or sees from what occurs around him, the reader is meant to understand or at least know how Gregor perceives the events from his subjective perspective. Thus, subjectivity is a key part of understanding “Metamorphosis” as it was meant to be understood. If the same plot was narrated from an objective point of view, readers would not have any insight into Gregor’s motivations, thoughts, or feelings, and Kafka’s work could not explore Gregor’s internal emotional journey or deeply question the family’s dynamics. Kafka, as a modernist, likely understood this and made a conscious choice for his narrative to rely on subjectivity. Kafka, like many modernists, wished to explore the subjective to be able to affect readers in a certain way and focus on Gregor’s subjective truths, which ironically can be understood by and resonate with a lot of people.

A later modernist, Virginia Woolf, approached subjectivity somewhat differently in her extended essay “A Room of One’s Own.” While Woolf uses subjectivity to portray a personal belief, much like Kafka does in “Metamorphosis,” Woolf is not inventing a fictional subjective experience. Instead, she is exploring her own subjectivity as it specifically relates to the topic of women and fiction. In this essay, Woolf is clearly trying to illuminate the subjective, stating that she will try

⁶ Kafka, Franz. 2002. “Metamorphosis Franz Kafka,” *Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka*, trans. by David Wyllie <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm>> [accessed 24 April 2020]

⁷ Woolf, Virginia. 2002. “A Room of One’s Own,” *Project Gutenberg Australia* <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200791.txt>> [accessed 25 April 2020]

to 'lay bare the ideas, the prejudices, that lie behind this statement'⁷. Through this quotation, it is clear that she wants her audience to understand not only her belief that a woman writer needs a room of her own and a certain amount of money to successfully write fiction but what influences and experiences led her to this belief. In truth, "A Room of One's Own," is an essay about subjectivity as much as it is an essay about women and fiction. This subjectivity is explored as early as the first paragraph as Woolf details how she thought of the question of women and fiction;

When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant...at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light.⁸

In this passage, Woolf is attempting to emulate her own thought process when posed with the topic of women and fiction, listing ideas of what she thought the words meant and what she thought the individuals who posed the question meant by the words. She goes on to say that, when considering the topic in the last way, 'I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever. All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point--a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'⁹. This quote further explores Woolf's subjectivity in a subtler way. Here, Woolf states her subjective beliefs directly before going on to explain some of them. She clearly articulates the point that she has come to deliver; she acknowledges that this is her opinion; she shows that she believes that this is a minor point; and, she reveals what she thinks a lecturer's first duty is. Tackling subjectivity more directly later in the essay, Woolf states that 'One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact'¹⁰. Through these words, Woolf continues to focus her point through the lens of subjectivity and reveals her modernist attitudes towards subjectivity and the truth. She asserts that fiction is the truth, but not fact. She also seems to allude to the notion that some of what she will say in this essay is also truth, rather than fact, but she simultaneously states that 'lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them'¹¹. The lies that she mentions here are more metaphors than lies. In order to portray and uncover her subjectivity, she later utilizes an extended metaphor or allegory of a fictional journey on the riverbank as an

⁸ Woolf, Virginia. 2002. "A Room of One's Own," Project Gutenberg Australia
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⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

equally fictional version of herself ponders women and fiction. Before going into this metaphor, Woolf states that;

I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here--how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and made it work in and out of my daily life. I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste-paper basket and forget all about it.¹²

This furthers the assessment that Woolf purposefully focused on the subjective in her essay. She explicitly informs her audience that the truth of her words is vague and open to interpretation from the reader's own subjective perceptions. It is clear that she expects her audience to draw their own conclusions; she does not pressure the reader to take what she says at face-value or claim that it is fact. Instead, Woolf shows that she believes that acknowledging the subjective makes her statements more true. She is not simply making a claim with no context for people to blindly accept. She welcomes questions or differing perspectives. Through metaphor and continuous explanation of her thought process, Woolf invites readers to find different answers than she did through the same process. Throughout the rest of the essay, Woolf continues to use vague, subjective, and suggestive metaphors to convey truths rather than directly stating them. She describes a symbolic river, easily navigated by the male undergraduate as an example to represent a man's easy access to information and respect. She describes a library barring women, in order to illustrate the difficulty women face in accessing the same. And, she imagines a sister of Shakespear, equally gifted but denied the same opportunities, to depict the difficult reality that women face. All of these subjective truths are demonstrated in modernist, subjective ways. These same truths could lead one to the conclusion that the female writer needs money and a room of her own to write fiction, or they could not. Woolf presents them all the same, as they are a part of her truth and her belief.

In conclusion, I believe this essay has sufficiently explored the literary significance of subjectivity in modernism. Through the assessment of the modernist works of Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," I have determined that subjectivity seems to be a vital tool for modernist truth-telling. On one hand, the modernist Franz Kafka utilized subjectivity to shape the direction, meaning, and understanding of his narrative in

⁸ Woolf, Virginia. 2002. "A Room of One's Own," Project Gutenberg Australia
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⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

“Metamorphosis,” focusing on the created, fictional subjectivity of Gregor Samsa. On another hand, a later modernist, Virginia Woolf, was acutely aware of her own subjectivity and meant to explore and display subjective truths that led her to her conclusion in “A Room of One’s Own.” In general, subjectivity seems woven into literary modernism as a whole. It appears to be intrinsically connected with many of the key features of modernism, most notably the modernist ideas of the unconscious and the process of representation. For Franz Kafka, the unconscious of Gregor was explored through the third-person limited point of view, altering how both Gregor and the story were represented. For Virginia Woolf, she worked to illuminate her own unconscious and represent her ideas in new, subjective ways. Thus, modernists seemed to feel that they could not share the full truth or meaning of their own ideas or accurately illustrate human consciousness through characters without the use and examination of subjectivity. Through studying these modernist works by Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf, it is clear that modernists believed the subjective truth was more true. Woolf is undoubtedly aware that no idea exists on its own, without influence from the subjective experience of the person or people that thought of it, and she seems keen to impart that knowledge in “A Room of One’s Own.” Kafka seems to similarly understand the importance of subjectivity, but his work, “Metamorphosis,” uses it more subtly, as a tool and an element of his narrative that focuses the meaning and the impact of the story, rather than highlighting and studying it as Woolf does. Overall, both of these modernist works could be described as subjective in different ways, with Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” working more clearly to describe the subjective itself. This treatment of the philosophical concept of subjectivity aligns with general modernist attitudes. So, subjectivity and modernism seem to work well together, at least in the case of the modernist works of Virginia Woolf’s extended essay “A Room of One’s Own” and Franz Kafka’s well known “Metamorphosis.”

¹² Woolf, Virginia. 2002. “A Room of One's Own,” Project Gutenberg Australia
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