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The Mrs. Browns of Modernism

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Honors Thesis
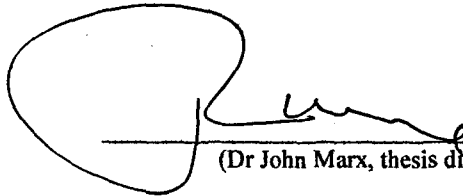Department of English
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The signatures below certify that with this essay Kathleen O' Donnell has satisfied the thesis requirement for Honors in English.

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The Mrs. Browns of Modernism

There was a time in the middle of the twentieth century when scholars, students, and general readers shared an idea of what constitutes modernist literature. It was possible for them to produce a short list of works, which most agreed constituted a canon of modernist literature. This list was composed of texts that were different but seen as comparable. It featured the usual suspects from Joseph Conrad to James Joyce to Virginia Woolf, all of whom were understood to be experimental and even a little bit strange when considered against the backdrop of British fiction as a whole. And yet they were seen as strange in a related way. The notion of such a stable canon belongs to the past. Sometime towards the end of the twentieth century, readers lost the sense of a cohesive definition of modernism. They replaced it with a plural category of modernisms and with the belief that any unified understanding of modernism would not give enough justice to the complex differences between the texts and their authors.

I begin with this literary critical parable because I am interested in arguments about and attempts to define what modernism was. I situate the following project after the fall of the modernist canon, in a literary critical context in which it remains doubtful that modernisms could be modernism again. As a response to that situation, I propose a way of defining modernism that may do justice to the complexity and variety of modernist texts, while seeking also to recognize that which they had in common. Although what follows might be called an analysis of literary form, it is not a return to

the formalism of modernist literary critical history. Rather, it borrows from the recent scholarship of Franco Moretti and from his attempt to rethink the literary history of form.

To clarify the literary critical situation in which my thesis intervenes, allow me to offer two symptomatic scholarly efforts from the last decade and a half of modernist criticism. In his study *Modernisms*, Peter Nicholls argues that to view literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as part of a unified modernist movement is to over simplify a complex body of work. Nicholls argues that the classification of modernism appeared belatedly rather than emerging alongside the literature that it sought to define. "Modernism" rose as part of an attempt to distinguish work from the second half of the twentieth century from what came before. Given such an instrumental purpose, it should not be surprising that modernism, as we have inherited it, ignores not only the various literary styles of the early twentieth century but also its highly individual authors. Nicholls argues that to view modernism as a single definable movement "abridges [the] real difficulty" of literature that, in truth, derives from an array of authorial intentions and beliefs. Attempts to define modernism fall short because they overlook "the more complex inscription of ideologies in the modernist style which frequently became their most powerful and ambiguous vehicle" (Nicholls, vii). With this statement, Nicholls fragments modernist style by treating it as the delivery mechanism of heterogeneity rather than the foundation of an easily canonized movement. By declaring that multifarious politics or ideology can be discerned in literary style, he opens the door for literary critics to begin classifying movements within the movement on the basis of fine distinctions that might, taken to their extreme, break modernism apart author by author.

Bonnie Kime Scott's *Refiguring Modernism* offers one model for pluralizing early-twentieth-century literature. Scott cites Woolf's use of the image of a web in *A Room of One's Own* as a metaphor that makes clear our "limited sense of modernism" as it has been generally received. According to Scott, Woolf has been marginalized by the male-dominated canon. To right this wrong, she contends, would entail a substantial revision of what we think modernism is and when we think modernism was. It would require that "significant dates [be] recalculated and associated with events that had not previously been figured as important to modernism. The mental process of 'figuring out' modernism shifted from genetic filiation to simultaneous attachments; the research investigated not just the figurative patterns in literary works, but also workable domestic and professional arrangements" (Scott, xvi). Each writer's style, according to Scott, is a result of her web of attachments. Therefore, depending on which author is placed in the center of the web, the whole web must be reconstructed in order to reflect his or her particular connections to other writers and readers. In order to study a modernist text, one must take into account these different relationships and correspondences as they appeared at a particular moment in the author's life. This approach requires that the history of modernism be rewritten in terms of individual authors placed in overlapping networks. Like Nicholls, Scott would have us believe that there can be no uniformity to the modernist movement. Like him, she makes it possible to treat modernist style as a vehicle for multiple ideologies and biographies.

These individual scholars represent a broader tendency in the current treatment of modernist texts to pluralize the movement by either emphasizing an ideology spoken by writing style, as Nicholls does, or by looking at style as the reflection of biographical

data, as Scott does. The problem with these approaches is that each privileges material that they locate outside the text. In other words, neither fully recognizes the extent to which ideology and authorship are manifested in and effects of texts. One reason why the fragmented version of modernism we inherited is unsatisfying, I would argue, is that such scholarship under values the way literature generates such effects. It seems to me that the first course of action in responding to such criticism should be to reread early-twentieth-century writing in a manner that treat its differences as first and foremost literary ones. Wanted is a method that does not transform literature into a vehicle for some discourse—whether ideology or biography—that is located outside of it and inevitably comes to dominate it. If we want to understand the plurality of efforts to innovate associated with early-twentieth-century writing, we have but to read what was written. When we do so, I believe, we shall find stylistic similarities amidst the incoherence posited by recent scholarship. These formal affinities may belie authorial conflict and ideological strife, Nicholls and Scott may well be correct, but with a reconsidered reading of modernist style in hand we may be better equipped to situate those differences in a literary context.

To guide my return to the page, I rely on the recent scholarship of Franco Moretti. In a series of essays published in the *New Left Review* between 2003 and 2004, Moretti provides a range of new tools for studying literary history. Of particular use for my project is the essay entitled "Graphs Maps and Trees Part 3," which outlines an approach emphasizing the devices that allow individual texts to participate in the life of a genre, which he describes as "temporary structures within the temporal flow" ("Abstract Models—1", 76). Genres, according to Moretti, are groups of novels that are similar in structure and whose particular form dominates the market for a certain period of time.

One of his privileged examples is detective fiction in the mode of the Sherlock Holmes stories. By attending to the intertextual features of novels, he argues, we may gain better understanding not only what makes individual texts distinct but also what makes them related to other texts. I elaborate on this method in the first section of my thesis. In the second section, I compare Moretti's scheme to Virginia Woolf's effort to distinguish a particularly modernist technique for rendering character. Her approach to literary history, I argue, is not unrelated to Moretti's. In her own series of essays, she invokes a figure she calls Mrs Brown, and shows how differently this figure might be presented by different writers in different periods. The way Woolf describes and relates to her Mrs. Brown, I believe to be reflective of the reasoning of a greater number of authors, all considering the same questions at the same time. Woolf delineates a range of techniques for establishing character that distinguish modernist prose from that of earlier eras. I make the case in the third section of this thesis that we may treat Mrs. Brown as a device whose appearance in a range of modernist texts makes clear their affinity. I proceed to identify this device at work in a select number of modernist fictions before concluding with a brief look at some reservations we might have about Moretti's approach to literary history and about my enterprise to reconceive of modernism as a more than less coherent field.

Morettian Reading

Franco Moretti describes his current literary critical goal as to "delineate a transformation in the study of literature", which might be accomplished by shifting

attention "from the close reading of individual texts to the construction of abstract

models" ("Abstract Models—1", 67). The abstract models he refers to are graphs, maps,

and trees; each helping to chart and explain a different aspect of literary history. Moretti

describes graphs as a useful tool for tracking the progression of literature across

international markets. Justifying his claim that literary history should not only by viewed

through the lens of an established canon of literature, Moretti cites Ferdanand Braudel in

a lecture he gave on history to companions in a German prison camp. Braudel states that

"history is indeed 'a poor little conjectural science' when it selects individuals as its

objects. . . but much more rational in its procedures and results when it examines groups

and repetitions" (qtd. in "Abstract Models—1", 68). Graphs provide a way of

discovering and describing the 'groups and repetitions' that occur in literary history,

without ignoring the "99 % of published novels which didn't make it into literature's

canon".

Using his graphs to track the numbers of novels published across different literary

markets in assorted countries, Moretti is able to trace the different phases and trends

which novel consumption undergoes in every market. This method of study leads

Moretti to his description of genres, which he describes in terms of "waves" of literary

production, as the "morphological arrangements that last in time, but always only for

some time" ("Abstract Models—1", 76). He remarks how "each wave produces more of

less the same number of novels each year, and lasts the same 25-30 years, and each also

rises only after the previous wave has begun to ebb away" ("Abstract Models—1", 77).

Genres, therefore, are a group of texts, which are morphologically similar, published

within a certain time period. Yet, a genre cannot be born, until its predecessor has died

away. Moretti quotes Shklovsky in his explanation of the phenomenon: "the new form makes its appearance to replace an old form that has outlived its artistic usefulness" (qtd. in "Abstract Models—1", 77).

To support the use of graphs for the discovery of these trends, Moretti points to what he terms the "literary cycle", the oscillation between genres that would attract male writers and those which would attract female writers. A generational pattern, which Moretti insists, explains away the consistent fluctuation of the gender ratio in authorship from generation to generation. Describing literary cycles, Moretti notes how these patterns "can only be glimpsed at the level of the cycle: individual episodes tend, if anything, to conceal it, and only the abstract pattern brings out the historical trend" ("Abstract Models—1", 90). This reasoning, in support of abstract models as a way of elucidating knowledge otherwise obscured by literary history, provides the rational behind his next two articles.

Unlike his article on graphs, Moretti's "Abstract Models for Literary History—2" focuses more on the internal structure of a novel. Where Moretti's graphs allow him to track the development of genres and literary cycles within literary history, his use of maps allows him to track the form and focus of literary genres as they change with their social context. Moretti's maps record the geographic expanse a novel covers. Moretti quotes D'Arcy Thomas in trying to explain his objective for this technique: "We rise from a conception of form to an understanding of the forces which gave rise to it . . . and in comparison of kindred forms . . . we discern the magnitude and the direction of the forces which have sufficed to convert one form into the other" (qtd. in "Abstract Models—2", 103). Moretti hopes that by comparing his maps or diagrams, drawn from

Mary Mitford's *Our Village* and John Galt's *Annals of the Parish*, one can "discern the various directions in which the rural class struggle, the industrial take-off, and the process of state formation have 'converted' the shape of nineteenth century idylls" ("Abstract Models—2", 103). In essence, Moretti's maps trace the relationship between social conflict and literary form, allowing one to garner a better understanding of the forces at work within a genre, and as that genre morphs into a new literary form ("Abstract Models—2", 103).

To explain the relationship between social conflict and the form of a genre, Moretti again quotes D'Arcy Thomas, "the form of any portion of matter, whether it be living or dead, may in all cases alike be described as due to the action of force. In short, the form of an object is a 'diagram of forces'" (qtd. in "Abstract models—2", 97). By this reasoning then, the form of a particular genre takes can also be described as a diagram of the different forces working on the story. By this logic, one can deduce the different forces at work on a text by examining its form. D'arcy describes the two type of force that can work upon an object as "internal and external" (qtd. in "Abstract models—2", 97). In terms of literature, inward and external forces would translate into the forces inherent to the story, and those exerted by events that are on the periphery rather than central to the novel, but which still exert force over its form.

To illustrate this point, Moretti points to Mary Mitford's *Our Village*. In the first volume, "the village was the undisputed center of the surrounding countryside: the centripetal effects of the force 'from within' were omnipresent, while the force 'from without' was nowhere to be seen" ("Abstract Models—2", 97). When the first volume was written in 1824, the society was still mainly closed off from the larger world, so there

were no exterior forces competing with the social forces from within the village. When Moretti maps the distance covered within the novel, the concentric circles marking the characters' movement away from the center of the village only reach as far as three miles away ("Abstract Models—2", Figure 2). However, in 1832, three volumes later, Moretti notes how "its all over: the village's centripetal force is reduced to nothing, and the bulk of the book moves away, thirty miles, sixty miles, more . . . Something has happened here, and two stories suggest what: rick burning"("Abstract Models—2", 99). Forces external to those working within the village have begun to impact the novel, changing it to a form that is forced to be more outward looking than inward looking. As Moretti notes, "The armed peasantry of the 1830 uprisings: this is the 'force from without' which has 'acted upon' *Our Village*, altering its narrative pattern beyond recognition" ("Abstract Models—2", 100). As the social world surrounding the novel changed (i.e. the peasant riots), the form of the novel had to change along with it. Moretti writes, "For every genre comes a moment when its inner form can no longer represent the most significant aspects of contemporary reality . . . at which point either the genre betrays its form in the name of reality, thereby disintegrating or it betrays reality in the name of form" ("Abstract Models—2", 102). When the issues of the contemporary reality can no longer be represented in the novel's form, when the larger world becomes too pressing to be ignored in the small scope of the village story genre, the genre must change or give way to another genre, for to remain the same means to become, in the words of Shklovsky a 'dull epigone', of what it once was (qtd. in "Abstract Models—2", 102).

In the third essay of the series, "Abstract Models for Literary History—3", Moretti describes how his model of the evolutionary tree provides a look at "the micro-

level of stylistic devices" ("Abstract Models—3", 63). He describes how, when he began to study evolutionary history, he realized that "it opened up a unique perspective on that key issue of literary studies which is the interplay between history and form. Theories of form are usually blind to history, and historical work blind to form, but in evolution, morphology and history are really two sides of the same coin"("Abstract Models—3", 43). Moretti explains how "trees are a way of constructing morphological diagrams, with form and history as the two variables of the analysis: vertical axis . . . charting the regular passage of time . . . and the horizontal axis following the formal diversification . . . . that would eventually lead to 'well-marked varieties', or to entirely new species"("Abstract Models—3", 45). The trees provide Moretti a way of describing the forces that he believes shape literary history: devices and genres. Devices, Moretti explains, are what cause the divergence of literary form along the tree. An author develops a new device within a singular text. This device, if popular, ensures the survival of the reading audience of that text, and, in effect, the survival of that text in literary history. This device is then picked up by other authors, and reproduced in more texts creating the genre, or a new species of literary form, in the terms of evolutionary history. Though one text may begin a divergence, "once the genre is visualized as a tree, the continuity between the two inevitably disappears: the genre becomes an abstract 'diversity spectrum' whose internal multiplicity no individual text will ever be able to represent" (Moretti, "Abstract Models—3", 52).

To explain his theory of the creation of genre based on literary devices, Moretti examines the presence of clues in detective fiction. In "The Slaughterhouse of Literature", Moretti explains how he tested his theories of how form influences the

survival of certain novels by looking at the case of Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.* When he brought twenty detective stories from Doyle's period to his graduate class at Columbia, his class combed them for the "clue", the literary device they chose based on its "exceptional visibility and appeal" ("Slaughterhouse", 212). When they mapped the stories onto the tree based on the presence of clues, Moretti describes how "two things stand out from the very first branching: first that quite a few of Conan Doyle's rivals use no clues at all; second, that these writers are all completely forgotten. Form and the market: if a story lacks a certain device, a negative 'information cascade is triggered', and the market rejects it" ("Slaughterhouse", 214). What develops is a canon which enjoys continued publication year after year because these texts have mastered the utilization of a certain device which the reading population has decided to value.

Moretti notes how, during his research, a graduate student pointed out that "if we search the archive for one device only, and no matter how significant it may be, all we will find are inferior versions of the device, because that's all we're really looking for. No matter what our intentions, the research project is a tautological one: it is so focused on a canonized device . . . that in the noncanonical universe it can only discover . . . the absence of the device, that is, of the canon" ("Slaughterhouse", 226). If one looks to the canon to find a common trait, then uses that to trace the evolution of that genre, the result is going to inevitably be that the texts left at the end are the canonical texts of that genre. The criticism brought up by the graduate student is undeniable. It may also be unavoidable, however, in any search for a critical law that defines a genre. This cost of doing business ought not keep us from thinking about something like modernism as a field, rather than a series of discreet works and authors. But it should make us reluctant to

imagine that any single device could serve as a magic key for unlocking the secret of a literary genre or literary period.

Moretti counters the student's claim by arguing that his approach is useful as "a way to 'open up' literary history, showing how the course selected by Europeans is only one of the many coexisting branches that could also have been chosen (and weren't) . . . most of my article tries precisely to explain why Conan Doyle's selection makes sense. But 'explaining' means organizing the evidence we have so as to account for a given result: it doesn't mean maintaining that that result was inevitable" ("Slaughterhouse", 227). Moretti's approach to literary history helps to illuminate how a certain number of texts have survived out of the vast number published, creating the canonical texts of the genre. It provides a way to notice what texts and devices won in the struggle for literary survival, while recognizing the immense possibility of different outcomes that could have been. From this, one can begin to analyze why certain texts survived, why certain devices were so successful, while still acknowledging that this is not the only path literary history could have traveled. I seek to identify one particularly successful device from the modernist period below.

Woolf as a Literary Historian

In what follows, I describe a character type that I call, "Mrs. Brown." This is the name that Virginia Woolf gives the elusive aspect of modernist character she attempts to capture in a series of essays, most notably, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Mrs. Brown arises out of the theory and literature of a variety of authors writing around the beginning

of the century. First and foremost, these authors agree that Mrs. Brown is a character defined by her changeability. She is not a character laid out in a few lines in the opening chapter of a novel, but rather one that is slowly built out of a series of different impressions, those of the narrator and other characters, as well as her own. Thus, her character is marked by variableness, subtly changing with each added perspective. Another characteristic of Mrs. Brown is a banal exterior which belies a complexity of thought and feeling beneath. Mrs. Brown is a character type that renders the complexities of the ordinary human, rather than the remarkable or heroic, yet celebrates this ordinariness as its own sort of heroism. Finally, Mrs. Brown is also marked by an element of unknowability; because, as a complex being, she is not fully known to herself, nor can she be fully known by the other characters in the novel or the narrator. I will give a fuller description of Mrs. Brown in what follows, and, by showing her at work in a variety of texts, suggest how she can be treated like Moretti's clue as a device for defining a body of literature.

In her essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", Woolf describes the history of British literature in a way which seems to anticipate Moretti's later evolutionary model for literary history. Beginning her argument, Woolf quotes Arnold Bennett's view of the survival of a novel: "it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must" (qtd. in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 200). The logic of Bennett's argument reflects that purported by Moretti in his argument on the evolution of literature, substituting the "realness" of characters for Moretti's clues. However, it is still left to be determined what would constitute a "real character". Woolf attempts to answer this question by referring to the great novels of the Victorian age. She

reflects how "if you think of these books, you do at once think of some character who has seemed to you so real (I do not by this mean so lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls and country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, and the immortality of the soul . . . And in all these novels all these great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 200). In other words, a character can only be labeled real if it is able to effectively communicate the sense of reality, which the author is portraying, in a way that convinces the reader of the truth of that vision. However, Woolf seems to vary in her description of "reality", sometimes holding it as an extra-literary concept, and at other times describing it as something dependent on the text. The result of this is that Woolf chastises her readers for allowing writers "to palm off upon you a version of all of this, an image of Mrs. Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever"("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 212). Woolf ends up describing reality as both something a writer can create, thus more like a literary technique, and also something that can be measured by an external standard, suggesting that a Mrs. Brown can fail to represent some extra-literary version of herself. The "reality" which the character must communicate can be anything from the broad ideals of love and war, to the smaller mundane cares of daily life. Regardless, the reader must be able to understand and relate to the life being presented to them by the character. The character must convey this life in a way that makes the truth of his portrayal apparent to the reader. If it is successful as a literary device, the reader will be able to view the world through the eyes of the character, meaning that it also succeeds in terms of an external standard.

The question then becomes how the author might be able to accomplish this feat. For Woolf, this is a literary problem of a technical nature, rather than simply an issue of the individual author's ability to express himself. A writer needs to have tools or conventions at his disposal which can be recognized by both the reader and the writer, in order to help them bridge the gulf between the author and his readers, regardless of the differences of between the two. Woolf explains the nature of the convention, comparing it to the conventions of conversation. She describes how "both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and his unknown guest on one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other. The hostess bethinks her of the weather, for generations of hostesses have established the fact that this is a subject of universal interest in which we all believe . . . So it is in literature. The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 206). The reason the characters of the Victorian age were able to seem so real was because their authors possessed the tools necessary for communicating a meaningful reality to their readers. Both the readers and the author had tools at their disposal which both recognized as a successful way of creating a character. The hostess engages her guest in conversation by mentioning the weather, and her guest is able to recognize her intention, and strives to co-operate by participating in the conversation. In literature, the writer sets out certain aspects of a character, which the reader recognizes as the beginnings of a character. The reader then agrees to suspend his disbelief and 'participate in the far more difficult business of intimacy" as it is described by Woolf.

However, it is important to note, that Woolf's description of literary conventions relies on a highly classed concept of the reader. She assumes that the readership of a text has the time, energy, and education to be able to interact with the text in such an engaged way. Woolf imagines her readers to be willing to spend so much energy in order to help the text relay its vision of reality, and reach its potential.

In Woolf's account, as the Victorian age faded, the Edwardian age had to find a set of conventions that would work for their time, that were applicable for the changed reality they were trying to communicate. Differentiating her own period from that of the Edwardian age, Woolf states, "I will suggest that we range the Edwardian and Georgian writers into two camps; Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy I will call the Edwardians; Mr. Forster, Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot I will call the Georgians" (Mr. Bennett, and Mrs. Brown, 194). Describing the transition between the Victorian and Edwardian age, Woolf reflects how "after the creative activity of the Victorian age it was quite necessary, not only for literature but for life, that someone should write the books that Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy have written" (Character in Fiction, 201). Woolf describes a literary history where the literary forms change as the reality being depicted changes. As the reality of the Victorian era changed into that of the Edwardian era, a change in literary form was necessary to keep the literature relevant to its time. Woolf states that this change was necessary "not only for literature, but for life". This suggests that while life may make a change in literary style necessary, the relationship between literature and life that interests Woolf is a reciprocal one. Having a pertinent and applicable literary form can have an impact on the life it represents. This is why it is important to find a style that captures life, because that

style also has the power to alter it—or at least our perception of it. The problem Woolf sees in Edwardian writing is that Bennett and company were unable to capture life in their period. Their goals were to reform society rather than to capture the life which populates it, and as a result, their books encouraged one to join societies, but were unable to be complete as books in themselves, since their aims lay outside of the text. To capture life in a text, Woolf admits is to change it, by providing the viewer a new way to view it. The Edwardians however, because they were unable to capture life, lost their chance to change it through their novels, the result being that the reader has to actively finish the book themselves and try to actively reform society, and thus accomplish the goals of the text.

In the terms of Moretti, the devices of literature need to change in accordance with the times in order for literature to remain meaningful for the readers, and thus, to survive. It is in a similar mindset that Woolf writes "if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honor and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured" (Modern Fiction, 154). However, where Moretti analyses this trend purely in terms of the market and the factors which lead to the continued publication of some texts as compared to others, Woolf seems to suggest that this "evolution" of literary techniques has a much more extended impact than simply the publication life of a text. She imagines that this evolution is necessary because life is constantly changing. In order to remain meaningful, and thus read and published, a text must provide a way of depicting life in a way which alters the reader's sense of life and understanding of it, changing the

way they view life. She imagines evolution of literature and reality as part of a never-ending cycle, with changes in one leading to and feeding changes in the other.

Woolf describes the Edwardians as materialists; "house property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy . . . For that age and generation, the convention was a good one" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 206). However, while the convention may have worked for the Edwardians, it is useless for accomplishing the goals and needs of the Georgian age. The conventions of the Edwardians worked for them because their goals are not the same as those of the Georgians. As Woolf writes, "the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself" (Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 202). While the Georgians are interested in character as the truest was to represent reality, the Edwardians goals are more directed towards social reform, and because of this their conventions are established to communicate different truths. Woolf explains how "they have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature. And so they have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose, which do their business . . . but for us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 205). In her essay, "Modern Fiction", Woolf declares that "it is a mistake to stand outside examining 'methods'. Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist's intention if we are readers" ("Modern Fiction", 152). The problem is not with the methods of the Edwardian age, as they were very successful for the authors who utilized them. However, the Georgian age, trying to present their

own conception of reality, must find their own conventions in order to do so. They need conventions which can "bring [the readers] closer to the novelist's intention", and the Edwardian methods, created for a different age and different purposes, are incapable of performing that duty. It isn't the methods of the Edwardians that poses the problem. It is that they are incapable of closing the gap between the new reality being presented by the Georgian authors, and their readers; a task which is necessary in order that both may be able to acknowledge and affirm the reality presented, and to create the "real" characters that are necessary to a novel's survival.

Mrs. Brown and the Genre of Modernism

Woolf ends "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" insisting that finding a new character type which will fulfill their needs and speak to the contemporary understanding of reality is a task which still to be accomplished by the writers of the Georgian age. However, her Mrs. Brown can be seen as an example of this character she calls for. Embodied in Mrs. Brown are many of the character traits deemed essential by the writers of Woolf's age. By looking at Woolf's Mrs. Brown, I hope to elucidate the characteristics of the modernist character type, which I have been calling "Mrs. Brown"; some of the main features of which are the variability of a perspectival account of reality, an interest in the complexity which lies beneath the surface of the common man, and the insistence of the impossibility of fully knowing another person, be it fictional or in life.

Woolf's asserts that the reason Georgians need a new way to present character, or a convention by which to present their vision to the reader, is because "on or about

December, 1910, human character changed" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 194). The year 1910 witnessed the death of Edward VII, as well as opening of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, 'outraging much of London Society'" (Introduction, Essays of Virginia Woolf, XV). However, it is not to these events in particular that she attributes the change in human character. She explains, "I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 194). Woolf describes how, around this time, "all human relations . . . 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" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 195). This change demands that literature be adapted if it is going to be able to depict a reality which seems real to the readers. As Moretti does when he notes the change in the "village story" genre after the peasant uprisings in 1830, Woolf looks to changes in the extra-literary world to account for changes in literary form. However, a problem that some early readers of Moretti have noted is that he does not seem to account for why literary forms change in the particular way they do. He only notes the catalyst, something which I will talk about in more detail towards the end of my thesis. Woolf, however, looks to explain why the literary form changes in the particular way it does in response to these catalysts.

The writers of the Georgian period are charged with the task of representing this change in human character, yet the tools they have at their disposal come from men who

have "never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner . . . they have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and their business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 205). The reality that is depicted by the Edwardians is one that is built from the details of the materials of life. In Woolf's words, "they have laid enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 207). Yet for a generation whose aim is to explore character, down to the most mundane, a house isn't enough.

Describing the new goals of the authors of the Georgian age, Woolf describes how "life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from beginning to end. Is it 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"("Modern Fiction", 150). Henry James echoes this sentiment in his essay, "The Art of Fiction": "Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life *without* rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it *with* rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention" (James, 16). Woolf's age is charged with the task of being able to find a convention that can communicate this new sense of life, of reality to the readers. The Georgian age must find a new means of

communicating, or creating characters which can convey this variable reality of their age. As she wrote, "on or about December, 1910, human character changed," and the task of the Georgian writers is to find a way to capture this change, to capture the vision of reality in all of its limitless variety (Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 194).

In reading Woolf's description of Mrs. Brown, we must not presume it to be her invention alone, but rather, realize that it was chosen because of how exceptionally well it represents a larger project of character renovation, in which a wide variety of writers participated. Trying to explain the nature of what is captured by the Mrs. Brown character type, Woolf declares that "Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface" (Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 205). By declaring her to be both human nature and eternal, Woolf seemingly contradicts her argument that the Edwardian tools are inappropriate for the writers of the Georgian period. If human nature is eternal, then the tools of any generation should remain applicable for creating the characters of any other generation. However, Woolf describes Mrs. Brown as being both human nature and eternal. While human nature may be eternal, the way in which it is understood and depicted changes depending upon the atmosphere, or reality to which it belongs. The essence of human nature, all that which makes us human, remains constant throughout the ages. However, depending upon the circumstances of the generation and the reality they face, each generation must redefine how they relate to these truths and how they understand the meaning of these truths, in order to make them equipped to handle the challenges of the day. Thus, the face of human nature changes as it is redefined by the understanding of each particular

generation, creating the need for each generation to develop their own tools for representing their particular understanding of human nature.

If human nature remains in essence the same, or eternal, yet still changes depending upon the reality it inhabits, then it is safe to assume that human nature is, in a large part, perspectival. Henry James goes into more detail about the necessity of representing reality in perspectival fashion in his essay, "The Art of Fiction." He states, "a novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its values, which is greater or less according to the intensity of impression" (James, 8). James describes the importance of experiences to writing, in the same way that Woolf speaks of impressions. He describes how, "The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience . . . if experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. Therefore, I should certainly say to a novice, 'Write from experience, and experience only'" (James, 11). Impressions for James constitute experience, a sort of knowledge or understanding of what we have viewed, heard, touched, or smelled. It is this impressionistic knowledge, which is so highly perspectival, which James argues should be the basis for all writing, as the best way to get to the truth of the matter being represented. In creating her Mrs. Brown, Woolf encapsulates this impressionistic rendering of character, which other modernist writers like James felt to be the basis of representing a truthful character. James describes this theory, arguing that the incidents from which we derive our

impressions or experiences are the basis of characters, stating, "When one says picture, one says of character, when one says of novel, one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed at will. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"(James,13). James espouses the modernist experience of character, stating that character is actually nothing but a combination of experiences or incidents, and the impressions that we garner from them.

When telling of her encounter with Mrs. Brown, Woolf describes how "the impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring like a draught, like a smell of burning" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 198). The character of Mrs. Brown, which Woolf is building, relies so heavily on the perspective of those who describe her that her person can be likened to a smell without losing any of the force of her character, as it is built from the impressions that scent leaves. Woolf's description of Mrs. Brown's physical being is interspersed with Woolf's own assumptions as to what sort of life she has led in order to be at this moment, looking this particular way. Woolf describes how "There was something pinched about her—a look of suffering, of apprehension, and in addition, she was extremely small" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 196). Mrs. Brown's physical appearance seems to be a support for the assumptions Woolf has already made from her original impressions. Woolf's sense that Mrs. Brown is a suffering character is supported by the fact that "she was extremely small".

The physical appearance feeds into Woolf's sense of the character of Mrs. Brown, but works in the opposite way from how physical appearance works in the Edwardian era. When imagining how the Edwardian writers would see Mrs. Brown, Woolf writes, "Mr. Bennett, alone of the Edwardians, would keep his eyes in the carriage. He, indeed,

would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth . . . how Mrs. Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar; and had mended both gloves—indeed the thumb of the left hand glove had been replaced" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 203). However, the difference between how Woolf notices physical details of Mrs. Brown, her method embodying the modernist perspective on character, and how Mr. Bennett notices physical details is that Woolf is using Brown's physicality as clues to her interior life, as clues to the complexity of her being. As Woolf stares at Mrs. Brown, she notes how she "had no time to explain why I felt it somewhat tragic, heroic, yet with a dash of the flighty and fantastic, before the train stopped, and I watched her disappear, carrying her bag, into the vast, blazing station" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 199). Looking at Mrs. Brown, Woolf is overwhelmed by the impression she receives, the sense of all the possibility of this character who sits so calmly before her, the sense of her heroism through the ordinariness. When telling of her encounter with Mrs. Brown, Woolf describes, "I felt that she had nobody to support her . . . having been deserted or left a widow, years ago, she had led an anxious, harried life, bringing up an only son, perhaps, who, as likely as not, was by this time beginning to go bad. All of this shot through my mind as I sat down" (Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 196). Woolf creates a past and a life for this character built solely out of her own impressions, built from her own perspective of Mrs. Brown, her treatment of her character encapsulating the way perspective figures in the Mrs. Brown character type.

For Mr. Bennett, however, ordinariness is not suggestive of all the trials and triumphs of that come from manipulating an ordinary life, but, rather, is simply that:

ordinary. For Mr. Bennett, it would be sufficient to describe the way in which Mrs.

Brown has mended her gloves, because, rather than view that as a jumping point for a

series of impressions and assumptions as to who she is; he would view it as the whole of

who she is. She is an old woman who wears inexpensive jewelry, and must mend her

gloves. As Woolf writes, "Mr. Bennett . . . is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that,

because he has made a house, there must be a person living there" ("Mr. Bennett and

Mrs. Brown", 205). As the goals of the Edwardians were reform, Mrs Browns interiority

would not have mattered as much as the facts of her material life, where her interiority

was everything the modernists, who were trying to capture life in all its variability, rather

than reform it.

Woolf describes how the perspectival account of character requires two things

from readers: "your part is to insist that writers shall come down off their pliths and

pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs. Brown.

You should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety;

capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven

knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose

and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course,

the spirit we live by, life itself"(Character in Fiction, 212). Because the character of Mrs.

Brown is a matter of perspective, both her own, and those looking upon her, she is

capable of changing at any moment; she is "an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite

variety". However, this also requires an active participation on the reader's behalf in

order for the character to come to life. It is the reader who must insist that Mrs. Brown

also reflects their view of reality. Mrs. Brown must be adaptable to the reader's

perspective and interpretation, so that she can be molded into a reflection of the reader's reality as well. Woolf describes Mrs. Brown as 'our Mrs. Brown', suggesting that she belongs both to herself and to her readers ('Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 212). She writes to her readers, "In this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe . . . In one day, thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow writers to palm off upon you a version of all of this, an image of Mrs. Brown, which has no likeness at all to that surprising apparition whatsoever" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 212). To be truthful to Mrs. Brown, the reader has to be able to see his version of Mrs. Brown in her as well. Mrs. Brown has to have the capacity to reflect the reader's sense of reality, as well as the author's, if she is going to be true to the vision of the 'infinite' reality of Mrs. Brown reflects. The danger, however, of having a character who is so wholly a product of different, variable perspectives is the chance that the character may become unintelligible, that the "infinite variety" of Mrs. Brown may make it difficult to pin her down at all. I will discuss this risk more fully in my discussion of *Jacob's Room* later on.

Woolf describes the British public as one of the problems facing the Georgian writers, as they try to establish a character for their era. Describing her problem in terms of the narrative of Mrs. Brown, Woolf pictures "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. That is how we know they are old women" (Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 208). It is impossible to move from the materialism of the Edwardian age to the perspectival characters of the

Georgian age without maintaining a common ground, which both writer and reader can recognize. Thus, the perspectival depiction of character, Mrs. Brown, is not completely rid of all the material possessions, which would have defined Brown in Edwardian era. When Woolf imagines Brown, she envisions her "in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases. Her husband's medals were on the mantelpiece. She popped in and out of the room, perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long silent stares. The caterpillars and the oak-trees seemed to imply all of that" (Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 198). The material life is all still a part of character, yet, it is handled in a new way. Rather than defining Mrs. Brown, it seems that Mrs. Brown's character is what gives life to these artifacts. The entire scene is implied by Mrs. Brown's comment about the oak trees and caterpillars. Her possessions don't define her, but rather she defines them. These mundane objects are described as a part of "fantastic and secluded life" because the character of Mrs. Brown transforms them. The immense interest she holds as such a queer, little old lady adds an interesting aspect to the objects she chooses to surround herself with. Rather than simply being part of her situation, they become a reflection of her interior life by the way she reacts to them, has surrounded herself with them. Her character is impressed upon them; through her perspective they are shaped to fit her. Woolf declares that "the most important thing was to realize her character, to steep oneself in her atmosphere"(Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 198). Mrs. Brown's material possessions make up part of her atmosphere by allowing the reader to imagine her in the tiny details of her 'fantastic and secluded' life.

The end result is that Mrs. Brown is a character wholly under the control of neither the author nor the readers. The author presents a view of reality through his perception of the characters that inhabit it. These characters are then built upon by the impressions and perspectives of the readers, as they accept the presentation of reality presented through the character, and in doing so, also alter the character to comply with their sense of reality as well. Mrs. Brown is a character built of impressions, those of the author and the reader, creating a reality, which is then shaped by the perspective and impressions of the character, just as Mrs. Brown shapes the atmosphere of her mundane life by the sea.

Mrs Brown in Modernist Fiction

When discussing divergence in literary history in his third article of the *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* series, Moretti describes how it is the device which "generates this morphological drifting away" of literary form from the established models. The presence and proliferation of this device in other texts is what then forms the genre. However, genres do not simply trace the straight line from a device's conception in literature to its extinction. When describing the function of an evolutionary tree, the model through which Moretti describes genres, he notes how "a tree is a way of sketching how far [a device] has moved . . . from its point of origin" (Moretti, "Abstract Models—3", 48). The device may change in the way it functions or looks over the course of its lifespan, each change causing a divergence or a new branch in the tree. Yet by tracing the life of a device, through all its changes and variations, one can sketch out the boundaries of a

genre. By tracing Mrs. Brown through her many transformations, one can begin to discover the patterns of interconnectedness, which provide the basis for defining a cohesive genre of modernism. The texts discussed here are only intended to be a small sample of the many different texts in which Mrs. Brown appears, chosen for their value in illustrating the transformations that occur in the Mrs. Brown device.

One example of a text in which one can note the transformation of Mrs. Brown is Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. In his work, *Ford Maddox Ford: A Study of His Novels,* Richard Cassell remarks on the narration of the *The Good Soldier*, stating, "since Dowell's impressions are not stabilized, he never allows the reader's to be"(Cassell, 180). The reader is confined entirely to the perspective of John Dowell as he looks back over his life, his impressions and memories, and tries to put together the events of the past few years. The result of this technique is that the reader's sense of reality is shaped as Dowell's is shaped. Accordant with the Mrs. Brown trope, the characters of *The Good Soldier* are built through a series of the narrator's impressions and reactions, as the story unfolds. The reader slowly begins to understand the undercurrents between the different characters as Dowell does, through his retelling of the story.

When Dowell opens his narrative, remarking on the years he spent with his wife and the Ashburnhams, he remarks, "I can't believe that that long, tranquil life, which was just stepping a minuet, vanished in four crashing days at the end of nine years and six weeks . . . No, by God, it is false! It wasn't a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison—a prison full of screaming hysterics, tied down so they might not outsound the rolling of our carriage wheels" (11). Dowell had lived his life believing the people he lived with to be as ordinary as their external appearances suggested. However, upon finding out that

they were actually characters following the Mrs. Brown type, whose external ordinariness only hides a complexity within, he is completely overcome by the knowledge. In these reflections, he also notes the extraordinary changeability of his friends, insisting, "And yet I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true . . . For, if for me, we were four people with the same tastes, with the same desires, acting—or no, not acting—sitting here and there unanimously, isn't that the truth?"(11). In this statement, Dowell acknowledges the way a character can change when viewed through variable perspectives. Though they may not have seemed simply four good friends to Leonora, for instance, that doesn't mean they weren't simply four friends when viewed from his perspective. He reflects, "if for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years and six months less four days, isn't it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple" (11)? He does not suggest that, because he was viewing his friends from his limited and naïve perspective, they were not what they seemed. In accordance with Henry James' description of character, Dowell's friends are built from the knowledge he gained from his impressions of them. It is not until he has different experiences from which to garner his impressions that they become the rotten apple, for as James states of another writer who wrote without having complete knowledge of the situation she wrote about, "the glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. She had got her impression, and she evolved her type . . . she converted these ideas into a concrete image and produced a reality" (James, 11). Because Dowell's experience of his friends was that of a "goodly apple", that is his reality. Because reality is based on personal perspective, the reality of his friends does not change into a "rotten apple", until he has gained more

experiences, which will then change his perspective of reality. They were who he thought they were, until he realized the complex affairs between them, at which point they became someone else for him. In this way, *The Good Soldier* explores in depth the tentative, unknowable aspect of the Mrs. Brown character. The basis of the plot of *The Good Soldier* explores the fact that it is impossible to fully know another human being, as it is equally impossible to fully know and understand oneself.

The attitude of *The Good Solider,* expressed in Dowell's comparison of his friends to a rotten apple, raises an interesting question regarding the instability of the Mrs. Brown character type. Namely, what does is mean to say that "for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple", which becomes rotten only as the narrator's awareness and perspective change. When characters are constructed out of perspectives, there is no sense of an essence of the characters to which other's opinions and perspectives can or cannot be truthful. Dowell can say that the apple was good until it was bad, because that is true for him. This issue is explored in a more extreme degree in Woolf's *Jacob's Room,* which will be discussed later on.

Because the reader learns about the events from the perspective of Dowell's hindsight, a further complication is added to the reader's ability to understand the events that have transpired. Dowell's objective is not to retell the story for the listener's understanding, but merely to understand it himself. As the narrator struggles to determine what the truth is, and where it matters, the reader undertakes the same task. The effect is that the reader comes to slowly understand the situation as Dowell finally becomes enlightened as to the relationships between his friends. Describing the novel, Cassell notes "We are literally thrown into the middle of the affair and have to face the

same discontinuities, confusions, and demands upon our powers of judgment that we muddle through in every day life" (Cassell, 176). As the reader works through Dowell's narration, he is forced to imagine the reality of the story judging only from the impressions of one perspective, simulating the effect of being in Dowell's position himself. The reader, like Dowell, is given the task of trying to understand people and events without having nearly enough information to understand their motives, exacerbating the unstable condition of building character out of the knowledge we garner from our impressions and experiences, since the narrator has no deeper insight to contribute. This provides the reader with the opportunity to apply his own associations and significance to the impressions and imagery he is given, allowing him, in the tradition of the Mrs. Brown trope, to incorporate Dowell's reality as his own, giving significance to Dowell's reality by reconciling it to his own.

However, while *The Good Soldier* explores and articulates many aspects of Mrs. Brown, it does not completely apply Mrs. Brown in accordance with her tradition. Mrs. Brown allows the reader to shape his sense of the reality portrayed by the story by leaving room for the reader to incorporate their own associations and understanding of reality. By requiring that the reader do some of the work of interpretation, the reader is able to apply the reality presented by the text to his own, allowing his understanding of reality to shape that presented by the text, as the text is also able to shape the reader's sense of reality. In *The Good Soldier*, the reader is not led to completely trust the narrator's interpretation or understanding of reality, creating a break in what was originally a cooperative venture. Cassell describes how "Dowell startles us into attention, causing us to protest and to seek the balance of other interpretations. Our sense of

superiority to him excites us to discover the truth" (Cassell, 166). The reader is not

meant to fully trust Dowell's interpretation of event, creating a situation where the reader

is working through Dowell's impressions and descriptions to determine the truth of the

situation, rather than simply flavoring the reality presented by Dowell with his own sense

of reality. Rather than a situation where the reader's sense of reality is complementing

that presented by the text, "the implications of what it all means are almost entirely left

up to the reader" (Cassell, 167). Thus, the novel relies completely on the reader's sense

of reality in order to form its own, rather than have it be a cooperative gesture. In *The

Good Soldier*, the Mrs. Brown device no longer amalgamates a series of impressions and

associations to give a deeper sense of reality, but rather limits the different perspectives

to which the reader has access, forcing the reader to rely more heavily on their own sense

of reality, and so making the reader aware of the prejudices attending such an interpretive

character as Mrs. Brown.

In Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, one can see a further permutation of the Mrs.

Brown trope. The Mrs. Brown trope began as a main character, which is shaped by the

impressions of the narrator and reader, who then in turn shapes the novel's reality

through his own perceptions. In *The Good Soldier,* this character type is changed by a

main character who is also the narrator, leaving the reader to parse through his

impressions as he receives them, rather than simply incorporate them as part of the reality

presented by the novel. *Jacob's Room* further digresses from Mrs. Brown by presenting a

narrator who has little to no access to the thoughts and impressions of Jacob himself. The

result of this is that the main character is built entirely of the impressions of the other

characters in the novel, to whose thoughts the narrator does have access. The reader is

left to determine for himself how Jacob feels about and shapes the events around him, without access to his thoughts and reactions as he experiences them. The narrator of *Jacob's Room* states "It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (*Jacob's Room*, 24). Without access to Jacob's psyche, the reader must put together hints of who he is, in order to understand the way he relates to and manipulates his surroundings, something which was originally accessible in the Mrs. Brown character type through her perceptions and thoughts.

In her study, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, Julia Briggs writes how "*Jacob's Room* employs a technique Woolf had envisaged in 'The Mark on the Wall', by which novelists would leave 'the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted'. From now on, Woolf's fiction would expect readers to fill in the gaps, 'to make a whole'" (Briggs, 104). Where *The Good Soldier* asked the reader to construct an image of the reality of the novel without the help of a third person narrator, *Jacob's Room* asks the reader to construct a sense of the reality of Jacob without the help of Jacob, and with little help from the narrator.

The characters of *Jacob's Room* are in the same position as the reader, trying to understand Jacob based only on their perception of him, though the reader has the added benefit of being able to garner impressions from a variety of perspectives on Jacob. Yet, the inconsistency between the characters impressions, between what is seen at one moment, and what Jacob presents the next, seem to emphasize the unknowability of man rather than suggest a greater understanding. The narrator juxtaposes contradicting images of Jacob, seemingly to emphasize this point: " 'Distinction'—Mrs. Durrant said that Jacob Flanders was 'distinguished-looking.' 'Extremely awkward,' she said, 'but so

distinguished looking'. Seeing him for the first time that no doubt is the word for him. Lying back in his chair, taking his pipe from his lips, and saying to Bonamy: 'About this opera now' (for they had done with indecency)" (*Jacob's Room*, 59). The narrator emphasizes how transient and instable impressions are by juxtaposing Mrs. Durrant's impressions of Jacob, which, though fitting at that particular moment, would have been in sharp contrast a moment before, when he and Bonamy were not yet "done with indecency". The sense of the limited knowledge we can gain from a character from our impressions of a moment seems to only increase with the variety of limited perspectives we get in *Jacob's Room*. Rather than feel that the reader's understanding of Jacob is increasing by viewing him through a multitude of experiences, we get the sense that we are being presented, not with an understanding of a character, but with an understanding of the infinite variety a character can possess. Woolf seems to have sacrificed the presentation of a character in exchange for exploring some of the aspects of Mrs. Brown, highlighting her variability and unknowability at the expense of the rest.

This theory is supported by Mrs. Flanders reflections on the inadequacy of the epithet she had engraved on her husband's tombstone: "well she had to call him something. An example for the boys. Had he, then, been nothing? An unanswerable question, since even if it weren't the habit of the undertaker to close the eyes, the light so soon goes out of them" (*Jacob's Room*, 11). It is impossible for Mrs. Flanders to determine what her husband was because he is no longer with her. The possibility of finding a way to describe or encapsulate him ends the moment he ceases to be able to perform that identity. With the multifarious nature of the self, we can only be described by the way we perform our selfhood at a particular moment, every other description is

just words, arbitrarily chosen to represent one version of ourselves as more encompassing than others. The result of this is that Mrs. Flanders, after years of living with her husband, has no sense of who he was now that he has died, and has been forced to pick one aspect to describe him, simply as "an example for the boys".

Where the Mrs. Brown trope began as a character who is formed by a combination of impressions from a variety of perspectives, by the time *Jacob's Room* is written, Mrs. Brown has transformed into a character who relies even more heavily on the impressions of individual perspective, while continually whittling down the number of perspectives available. Still maintaining most of the characteristics of the original trope, including a delight in the ordinary, a complexity which belies exterior appearances, Jacob is still a character through which a version of reality is presented that is formed and validated by both author and reader, though the emphasis now lies heavily on the reader's perspective. As Mrs. Brown continues to transform as she is replicated in other texts, this sense of the shared experience of reality becomes more and more simply a reflection of the reader's experience of reality, at which point the Mrs. Brown trope has reached the end of her lifespan, having fully transformed from the original model into a new conception of character.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *The Waves* by Woolf, one can find illustration of Moretti's theories of convergence and extreme divergence, respectively. Moretti writes in "Abstract Models for Literary History—3", "divergence prepares the ground for convergence, which unleashes further divergence: this seems to be the typical pattern" ("Abstract Models for Literary History—3", 55). The divergence from the Edwardian and Victorian forms which Mrs. Brown brought about, according to Moretti's

model, sets the ground for more convergence. By separating Georgian novels from those before them, Mrs. Brown has also opened up the possibility for a combination or convergence of those forms in new and interesting ways, creating a new branch on the literary tree. Yet the divergence that Mrs. Brown was, also opens up the way for further divergence, which may not be as productive as the original.

One can see the effects of convergence in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys takes Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* as the inspiration for her novel, experimenting with what happens if a nineteenth century story is told through the lens of twentieth century characters, which follow the Mrs. Brown type. *Wide Sargasso Sea* reshapes the character of Antoinette Cosway, who later becomes Bertha, telling her story completely from the limited perspective of different characters, with no independent narrator. The characters of the novel, thus, are shaped solely through the perceptions and impressions of others. Antoinette's old servant, Christophine, is tells Antoinette, "That man is not a bad man, even if he love money, but he hear so many stories he don't know what to believe. That is why he keep away. I put no trust in none of those people round you. Not here, not in Jamaica" (71). Christophine's comment reflects the larger way in which Rhys calls attention to the perspectival way her characters are built by exploring the problems and eventual despair that arises when people's perceptions conflict or are incorrect. In her introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Hillary Jenkins writes, "Jean Rhys is not simply filling in the gaps in the story to help us appreciate the Bronte text more. Instead she is changing how we see the classic novel. By giving voice to the marginalized and silenced (the mad woman, the colonized) she enables us to see the story of *Jane Eyre* in a context larger than that of England in the nineteenth century novel"

(Hilary Jenkins, Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea,* xii). The multi-perspectival

approach that Rhys takes opens up the world of Bronte's *Jane Eyre,* by exploring the

culture and problems of the colonial era from a variety of viewpoints, rather than simply

that of the upper-class British colonizers. The result is a new attitude towards *Jane Eyre*

which takes into account a fuller view of the reality of the issues which the novel depicts.

As Jenkins notes, "Just as *Wide Sargasso Sea* is full of the ghosts of an earlier novel, so

Jane Eyre is now haunted by Rhys' novel" (Hillary, xii). Jean Rhys employs a form of

the Mrs. Brown character type in order to re-explore issues of Victorian literature,

creating a new sort of novel in the process, and, thus, providing an example of Moretti's

belief that "divergence prepares the ground for convergence, which unleashes further

divergence".

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* illustrates another concept of Moretti's evolutionary

tree of literary history. Moretti writes, when a genre is just beginning to form, there are

"attempts at innovation, in the sense which evolutionary theory uses the term: they show

no foreknowledge—no idea really—of what may be good for literary survival. In making

writers branch out in every direction, then, the market also pushes them into all sorts of

crazy blind alleys; and divergence becomes indeed, as Darwin had seen, inseparable from

extinction" (Abstract Models-3, 52). Discussing Woolf's *The Waves* in *The Common*

Reader, Mitchell A. Leaska writes, "No novel like *The Waves* had ever been written

before, and none has been written since" (*The Common Reader,* 103). *The Waves* is

comprised of the soliloquies of six different characters. In the most extreme sense, the

reader is confined to a perspectival account of character from which to build a sense of

the reality the character interacts with and represents. In *Jacobs' Room,* the reader was

asked to come to an understanding of Jacob with no access to his interiority, but rather form our knowledge of his character on the impressions and perceptions of others concerning Jacob. In *The Waves,* Woolf takes this one step further. While the reader is given access to the thoughts and emotions of the character, this is all he is given. There is no second opinion to justify or validate the impression one garners from our experience of the characters, nor do we see the character in action truly, in the sense of interacting with other characters, which would allow us to judge the character by their actions as well as their thoughts.

Through this extreme presentation of the Mrs. Brown trope, Woolf stresses some characteristics of Mrs. Brown over others. Bernard reflects in one of his soliloquies "the complexities of things becomes more close, here at college, where the stir and pressure of life are so extreme . . . it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many" (*The Waves,* 76). Bernard's own self-reflections deny the reader the hope of being able to come away with any concrete sense of who Bernard is, because Bernard is not a stable being, he is "complex and many" rather than "one and simple". The limited perspective from which the reader is able to view the character, highlights the unknowability of another human being, an aspect of the Mrs. Brown character which is stressed by Bernard's own self-reflections. The sense of impossibility the reader faces in trying to come to an understanding of Bernard is emphasized again when Woolf uses Bernard's reflections to call the readers attention to the inadequacies of the form by which she has chosen to present her characters. Bernard reflects, "soliloquies in back streets soon pall. I need an audience. That is my downfall . . . to be myself, I note, I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is

myself" (*The Waves*, 115-6). This statement from Bernard calls attention to more than just the incomplete knowledge of a self and perspective that can be presented through a soliloquy however. In this statement, a larger commentary is made on the possibilities and failings of the Mrs. Brown character. Bernard states that he needs the "illumination of other people's eyes and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is myself". Bernard's statement recognizes not only the importance of perspectives in gaining a full sense of a character, but in applying it to himself, he suggests that we are not complete an humans without the perspective of others to supplement our self knowledge. It is not just that in fiction one must use multiple perspectives in order to come close to a representation of a whole and true character, but, instead, that a character, a self is not complete without the perspectives of others. It is a subtle difference, but one which extends the precepts of Mrs. Brown, commenting on the importance of perspective for forming a self, rather than just being important in the representation of a self.

In *The Waves*, Woolf questions more deeply the nature of perspective and how it changes the reality being viewed. Bernard questions, "how to describe the world seen without a self? There are no words . . . How describe or say anything in articulate words again? – save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk, habitual—this scene also. Blindness returns as one moves and one leaf repeats another" (*The Waves*, 287). A world without perspective, according to Wolfe, loses all that which characterizes it. Without perspective, reality fades, becomes habitual. Bernard suggests that reality exists only through the variation of our individual perspective, that "without a self", it must disappear. Again, Woolf is insisting on the values of the Mrs. Brown, by applying them to their most extreme degree.

Reality does not simply need to be represented through perspective to be accurate, but that without perspective, reality is altered, diminished, to the degree where it almost ceases to exist, becoming a habitual, rather than the "infinite variety" which modernists believed to be its identifying characteristic. In *The Waves*, Woolf illustrates by extremes what she means when she stated in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that change was necessary, "not only for literature, but for life" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 201).

The extreme degree to which Woolf takes the perspectival approach to character building has not been replicated in any novel since, meaning that it is the end of the branch that marks its divergence from the main Mrs. Brown figure on the evolutionary tree. However, *The Waves* is still very much in print, not at all extinct as Moretti predicts for texts that are unable to use the device in a way that inspires proliferation. In this way, *The Waves* is an enigma in the terms of Moretti's graph, one which may be accounted for by the popularity of the author, whose writings of every sort are still very much published. Yet, *The Waves* is not looked upon as a failure, but rather a masterpiece of her works. A way to reconcile *The Wave* with Moretti's theories may be that *The Waves* is largely recognized as a grand experiment, to see how far she could carry the subjectivity of Mrs. Brown, to the point where the characters are so perspectival, they almost don't qualify as characters in the technical sense of the word. In her diary, Woolf wrote, "Odd that they (The Times) should praise my characters when I meant to have none" (*The Common Reader*, 102). However, having taken the experiment to the furthest extremes possible while still remaining attached to the Mrs. Brown trope, there was no where left for later authors to go. Woolf's attempts in *The Waves* are great, yet sterile because of their greatness.

If *The Waves* represents an experimental extreme of the Mrs. Brown trope, it may do to end with a more popular example. Although modernist literature was rarely bestselling literature that does not mean it was without wide-reaching effects. J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* marks a popularization and perhaps an end to the Mrs. Brown trope. Mrs. Brown began as a character that allows the reader to inject his own sense of reality onto the novel and the character. As the trope is adopted by other novelists, it is transformed to rely more and more heavily on the reader's perspective. By the time of *Catcher in Rye,* Mrs. Brown has so completely become a reflection of the reader's reality, that it has become formative of the reader's reality, through the process of identification. Questioning the overwhelming popularity of an apparently unassuming novel, critic after critic has returned to its accurate representation of the adolescent experience, and the easy way in which readers are able to identify with Holden. In his article, "'You Must Change Your Life': Formative Responses to *The Catcher in the Rye"*, Mark Silverberg describes the reader's process of identification with Holden as the "formative summons" of the work (Silverberg, 7). Silverberg calls on Erik Erikson's definition of identification to explain the effect of the book upon the reader: "we 'identify' with those things which most immediately and intimately cause internal effects (usually positive feelings). Then in a process we call 'identification', we project those effects (our own feelings) onto the other which we believe to be their source" (Silverberg, 16). Holden Caulfield is a Mrs. Brown who not only allows readers to project their reality onto him, but projects his own reality right back. Readers, rather than simply shaping the text through their sense of reality, are offered a means by which they can shape their own sense of self. Silverberg explains, "In the case of the reader, he or she

identifies with 'Holden' . . . because in reading Holden's story certain positive internal feelings are produced. Hence the reader says, 'I identify with Holden because he is sensitive and intelligent,' rather than the more accurate statement: 'I identify with Holden because *he makes me feel* sensitive and intelligent'" (Silverberg, 17). In Holden, the Mrs. Brown is transformed from a character that is a receptacle for the impressions of the reader, to one by which the reader can project back onto himself certain images or qualities he wishes to find.

The reciprocal relationship of the original Mrs. Brown allowed the readers perspective to help form the reality of the text, which then shaped the reader's reality by providing him with a new means by which to view it. The reality presented in *The Catcher in the Rye* is not one which is largely shaped by the reader's perspective, but still changes the reader's sense of his own reality. Holden Caulfield is a Mrs. Brown so transformed that Holden does not need to be shaped by the reader's perspective in order to be able to still change the way the reader views his own reality. Rather than being formed by the reader's reality, the Holden simply reflects back what the reader would like to believe about his own. Thus, *The Catcher in the Rye* can be seen as the final transformation of the Mrs. Brown trope, having moved from a character type which reflects the variability of character and reality within the text, to one which reflects the variability of one's sense of self, independent of the text. As one reads *Catcher in the Rye,* one finds that one's sense of our own selves transform in accordance to what we view in Holden, rather than Holden transforming dependent on what perspectives are applied to him. In essence, what we imagine Holden's perspective of us to be creates that

change in our own selves, rather than our perspectives creating that change in Holden, marking the final, complete transformation in the Mrs. Brown trope

A Conclusion with Some Reservations

Some of the early reader's of Moretti's theories have called certain aspects of his argument into question. One of the most aggressive critics is Christopher Prendergast in his essay, "Evolution and Literary History: A Response to Franco Moretti". Some of the issues he raises also create problems in how I have applied Moretti's in this paper, the largest of which I will try to address here.

One of the precepts of Moretti's argument that Prendergast takes issue with is Moretti's use of an evolutionary model to describe the literary market. He notes, "Philosophers of the market like to think of it as a cognate of Nature. I cannot recall a single 'Marxist' who does so. The equation of market and nature under the aegis of evolutionary biology is exactly the move of social Darwinism. Clearly there is politics in this. It is a version of victor's history" (Prendergast, 61). The question is raised as to whether the existence of Mrs. Brown is a causal factor in the perpetuation of certain texts of the period, or merely one, which simply by coincidence, explains something that happens to be true. As evidence that Moretti's explanation is more circumstantial than causal, Prendergast points to Moretti's confusion in his explanation of the two readerships of his model, the "initial" and "later" readers. Moretti's theory claims that the initial readers developed preferences for certain traits or devices, and would only read

texts which included those devices, causing other texts to become part of the "Great Unread". This raises the question, according to Prendergast, of how the readers knew whether a text contained the device before they read it, and why they came to these preferences in the first place (Prendergast, 50-1).

These last two issues of readership at least can be reconciled in terms of the aims of this paper. As the goal of this project is not to determine why some texts ceased to be published whereas others still are, but rather to look at the way in which a large number of texts are linked together by their perpetuation of a certain device, Mrs. Brown, and thus to define a genre by stylistic technique. As so, the ability to determine how readers knew a device was present in a work in order to give it preference does not matter as long as the texts that were given preference and continued publication, all utilized the device. For the purposes of this paper, the success and popularity of a device is more important than being able to tell how it gained popularity. The reader's recognition of the device is irrelevant, so long as the readers and authors notice that a text has produced a response and seek to reproduce this response. As to why reader's developed preferences for certain devices over others, I believe this question was answered by Woolf's article "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown". Rather than simply note that the proliferation of certain devices can create genres, Woolf tries to answer why they do so. In this essay, Woolf looks to explain why reader's preferences seem to be so unified as to what device they use to represent the characters of their generation. The Mrs. Brown device became popular because it answered the needs of both the audience and the authors during the period of its popularity.

Prendergast also questions Moretti's explanation of how divergence occurs within a genre due to the transformation of the device, a question that is more pertinent to the issues at play in this paper. When discussing Moretti's history of the transformation of the free indirect style, Prendergast notes, "This, without question, is the most brilliant encapsulated descriptive history of the vicissitudes of free indirect style that I have ever read. But Moretti's aim here is not just descriptive, it is also explanatory; 'take a form, follow it from space to space, and study the reasons for its transformations'. But what are these reasons, what explains these fundamental mutations of function, what justifies the modeling of the relevant phenomena as the ever-new sprouting of the branches of the tree" (Prendergast, 54). Prendergast rightly notes that following the transformation of a device through literature does not account for the transformation of the device. As Prendergast states, "noting a fact is not the same thing as giving an explanation" (Prendergast, 55). However, I believe Woolf answers Prendergast's concerns about how to explain transformations in a device in "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown". As Woolf explains how and why the Mrs. Brown character developed in the particular way that it did, she also provides a model for how one might look to explain why the device mutates in the particular way it does.

Through a combination of Moretti and Woolf, I feel that most of Prendergast's biggest concerns are allayed, confirming my argument for the use of the Mrs. Brown character type as a means by which one can begin to define modernism as a cohesive genre. I hope I have been clear that I don't consider this paper to be a comprehensive definition of the field of modernism, rather a model for looking at the wide range of modernist texts in a way which suggests that they aren't as fragmented as we have been

led to believe. From the summary gloss of the different texts I have included in this paper, I hope one could imagine the way by which this method could produce a collection of modernist literature, which isn't just a reproduction of the original, discarded canon, but rather a collection of texts which are much wider in their range, extending much more broadly to also include texts such as *The Catcher in the Rye*. At the cost of not being able to look deeply into the individuality of each separate text, we are able to recognize how these individual texts participate in the larger conversation of the field as a whole.

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