Virginia Woolf’s New Biographical Experiment in

*Roger Fry: A Biography*

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Adeline Virginia Woolf, an English novelist and essayist, is regarded as one of the pioneer of stream-of-consciousness novel. In fact, her innovative spirit is reflected not only in the stream of consciousness novels, but also in her writing of new biography. *Roger Fry*, as Woolf’s only serious biography, contains the documentary features of biography and also expresses her experiment in biography writing. She manages to give full play to the writer’s subjectivity and uses her unusual narrative strategies so as to complete her poetic expression and endow the biography more literariness.

Keywords: new biography, documentary, narrative strategies, literariness

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, modernism pervaded in the western society. Nietzsche’s superhuman theory, Schopenhauer’s voluntarism, Freud’s psychoanalysis and Bergson’s philosophy of life deconstruct traditional values. This critical thinking has a profound influence on biographers’ writing ideas, methods and perspectives. Many writers begin to explore the innovations in the form and content of biographies. In 1927, Woolf put forward the term “new biography” for the first time in “The New Biography”, challenging the traditional biography in the Victorian age. The essay introduces what Woolf describes as “the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today. On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality” (Woolf, 1927, p. 229). New biography integrates the techniques of novel into the writing of biography, endowing the serious biography with a sense of literariness. Writers get greater freedom in fiction to explore new concepts of identity, to construct new myth of life. Woolf applied this fiction in her biography writing to explore the real identity of the subject.

In *Roger Fry: A Biography*, Woolf respects the documentary quality of a biography by describing a real historical figure in a convincing manner and a biographical frame. However, elements of the “new biography” are also present in the work. Woolf plays the role of her literary imagination and artistic feelings to express the true personality of the subject. It is not intended to describe all aspects of Fry’s life experiences in a dull way, but to make a full use of the author’s subjective initiative to select valuable historical materials with his
excellent judgment and take advantage of the narrative method to shape Fry’s image. The experiments are more interesting and ambitious than anyone has given them credit for. Woolf writes Roger Fry’s life as neither history nor fiction in order to invoke the stylistic standards that she never tired of questioning in her writing (Regard, 2003). In the collection of her memoirs, Moments of Being, Woolf talks about the possibilities of “a biographical fantasy” and “experiment in biography” (Woolf, 1967, p. 26). Roger Fry reflects Woolf’s exploration of literary biography.

2. The Documentary Quality of Biography

When it comes to “new biography”, the first thing emerged into our mind is fiction or imagination because of Woolf’s famous argument: “It is the granite of facts and the rainbow of elusive personality” (Woolf, 1967 p. 149). Woolf’s typical new biography works Orlando and Flush bring poetic imagination to biography with the technique of teasing and banter. In fact, too much fiction makes it more a fiction. The excessive emphasis on literary technique and the author’s subjective ideas can only lead to the loss of the core character of biography. “Whether the art of biography is only reflected in the use of fiction? How can granite and rainbow achieve better integration?” (Ye, 2020, p. 58) In Roger Fry, Woolf’s absolute mastery of fact and proper handling of fiction answered the above question.

The subject of the biography, Roger Fry, is not a fictional character but a real and famous person in British history. He was regarded as the forerunner of western modernist art and one of the greatest art critics of the 20th century. Fry was born in a wealthy Quaker family in London in 1866. His family had already had nine recorded generations of Quaker. His father Edward Fry was a judge. Fry received high quality school and family education, showing outstanding artistic potential. Fry studied science at Clifton College and then King’s College of Cambridge, and became a member of the Cambridge Apostles, which is a secret elite society in the city. Later, he went to Paris and Italy to study art, becoming a painter and a famous art critic. In 1910, he became a member of Bloomsbury, where a group of experts and scholars from all disciplines got together to pursue pure and extreme art, indescribable aesthetic emotion and inner true spiritual meaning. In the impressionist era and the difficult war years, his persistent pursuit of art made him the representative of the modernist painters. In the biography, Woolf shows how Fry went from being initially drawn to Italian Renaissance art to becoming a defender of Cezanne and modern art, from a “shy and studious youth born in a conservative Quaker family” to “the leader of rebels, the father of modern British painting” (Woolf, 1975, p. 182). Woolf does not make it up, but bases it on objective truth.

When Woolf begins to write the biography, she wonders how she can make a life based on “six cardboard boxes full of tailor bills, love letters and old picture postcards” (Edel, 1984, p. 19). Woolf wants to write down the extreme reality of Roger Fry’s life based on these objects which can represent historical truth. Actually, she has made it. Most of the non-fiction facts in the book come from various letters, diaries, manuscripts written by the subject himself, as well as the real history identified by Woolf’s reference to relevant historical documents and Chronicles. Fry went to so many cities to find the true meaning of art. Those old postcards were the evidence of his growing faith for art and pursuit for painting. Woolf quotes many letters by different people to convey the subject’s state of mind under certain circumstances. She seems to think that the words left by Fry, and his friends are more convincing than any biographer’s account, and she tries to leave deeper thoughts behind them by
preserving objectively the true details of people and things that once existed. For example, in the letter that Roger Fry wrote to his father Edward Fry in Cambridge in 1888, he tried to persuade his father to let him give up science and major in art. “I think I do feel strongly enough the desire for this, to ask you to let me try it” (Woolf, 1976, p. 60). His passion for art and his desire to win his father’s approval are evident in the letters. These letters are a concentrated reflection of Roger Fry’s relentless pursuit of art. Readers are easily touched by his persistence in art. And his outstanding image is strengthened by the genuine feeling of the letters. Friends’ letter and comments on Fry also enriches his image. “He sat at Rickett’s feet” (Woolf, 1976, p. 86), Woolf quotes the comment of Sir William Rothenstein on Fry. The novelist, Mr. Edgar Jepson, uses the same words. “He sat at Selwyn Image’s feet” He added, “a pleasant gushing young fellow,” “and rather an ass. I never dreamt that he would grow up the Father of British Painting” (Woolf, 1976, p. 86). From their comments, we can truly feel Fry’s common touch and sincerity. His capacity of referring to the artistic achievements of predecessors with an open mind is also revealed.

The author chronicles the important stages of the subject’s life and complements the text with illustrations. In the biography, the sorrows and joys of Fry’s childhood, the trips to many countries for learning, the twists and turns of career, all unfold systematically in a coherent time clues. For example, his journey of seeking knowledge including going to Clifton in 1881, Cambridge in 1884, Italy in 1888 and Paris in 1892, and his struggling for work from England to America are recorded in strict chronological order, showing that the author respects the common form of biography writing. Except for covering it in chronological order, she also inserts photographs of Fry from childhood to old age, of his family members, his living environment and his acquaintance with others to show his real life and image. Through photographs of his childhood in 1872, his youth in 1889, his self-portrait in 1926, and his old age in 1928, 1930 and 1932, the reader can clearly perceive the changes in his life. In his childhood photo, Fry was sitting on a stool with a book in his hand, looking cute and cuddly. His picture as a young man showed him in suit and handsome features. In his self-portrait, he held the brush as if he were painting. In a few photos of him in his old age, Fry had lost his youthful spirit. His look was calm and reflective. Through the illustrations of the subject in different stages of life, the author makes it easy for readers to intuitively perceive the real and vivid character. In addition, some of Roger Fry’s paintings, which reflect his painting level and aesthetic taste, are also extremely valuable. Woolf cleverly inserts these precious images into the biography, complementing the narrative. Adding illustrations makes the form of the biography more standardized and further prove the authenticity of the content.

Roger Fry is a serious biography having the documentary quality, whose subject is a real historical celebrity deserving a biography qualification, whose external form is strict in accordance with that of biography and whose content is based on historical facts from the first-hand materials. Woolf rearranges all the documents about Fry that she collects with her keen observations and unique judgments, trying to give them more vital performance.

3. The Aesthetic Expression of Literature

As a literary form of biography, Woolf grasps its core element, that is nonfiction. A biography of her best friend is not written in jest or fancy but with the utmost seriousness and absolute respect for the facts. However, as a creative and skillful writer, Woolf is always different from her contemporaries. She manages to display her unusual narrative strategies so as to endow the biography more literariness within the limited scope.
In the process of materials selection, Woolf gives full play to the writer’s subjectivity. She does not agree with the practice in traditional biography writing in which the writer loses creative voice in front of the absolute position of the subject. She performs her right as a writer to master what needs to be recorded in detail and what needs to be omitted with sharp judgment and rigorous logic. In some parts of information holes, it is even necessary to carry on reasonable imagination to perfect the narration. The following argument revolves around Woolf’s three subjective ways of dealing with the materials. First, when recording the life of Roger Fry, the author does not narrate it in a plain way but in the way of fiction or prose to create a poetic atmosphere. In the first chapter, Roger Fry felt his “first passion and suffered his first great disillusion” (Woolf, 1976, p. 15). In fact, Woolf portrays the scene in beautiful language not only makes the text interesting but also traces the influence of parental rigor and absolute docility on Fry’s negative character building. The author adds to the literariness of the text by quoting or narrating one story after another. She rarely tells us directly what Fry is like, but rather uses letters and manuscripts to make the characters speak for themselves, and then adds the author’s comments, summary and reflection. Although Roger’s letters and other first-hand materials are the granite of truth, Woolf’s rearrangement and comments infuse them with soul. One reader on a forum named sketching a present accounts that “Regardless of whatever Fry is so eloquent in describing or analyzing, Woolf is equally impressive in her role as commentator, summarizer, and occasional speculator” (Hagen, 2014). Besides, Woolf is loathe to describe Fry’s emotional state. Even when describing his experience with his wife Helen, Woolf writes only about the fun of their honeymoon in Italy and Fry’s pain after Helen’s illness. A few superficial and abstract words: “It was a time for both of them of ‘perfect happiness’” (Woolf, 1976, p. 96). “He was never again to know perfect freedom from anxiety; the ‘beauty of life as a whole’ was shattered” (Woolf, 1976, p. 103). But what level of affection did Fry and Helen reach? What was the level of Fry’s pain? Woolf quotes only a few letters in which Fry confided her anguish to her friends without any reasonable imagination of the characters’ inner feelings. Finally, when confronted with information holes, Woolf has to play the role of imagination. She only regards Fry’s autobiographical words as the source of imagination and chooses “representative scenes” to vividly depict Fry’s image. The text that describes Fry’s speech at the Queen’s Concert Hall is Woolf’s rainbow of imagination, for example, helps readers travel through time and deeply revel in Fry’s warmth and sincerity. Woolf’s purpose is not to reconstruct Roger Fry’s character by fiction but to restore his instantaneous psychological reality by rational use of a writer’s means. Just as Fry himself suggested “the possibility of a double life; one the actual life, the other the imaginative life” (Fry, 1981, p. 18). The actual life is pragmatic and cautious, while the imaginative life extends contemplation and insight. Chris Richards explains the difference between actual life and imaginative life as a “distinction between seeing and looking” (Richards, 1973, p. 24).

Woolf applies the narrative strategy of modern novel to her biography creation. First, she uses the narrative method of multiple perspectives to shape Fry’s three dimensional image diversified personality. She challenges the omniscient point of view which is frequently used in the traditional biography. Instead, the true psychological state of the subject is presented to the reader little by little through the views of many people. Woolf believes that a single perspective will fail to show round figures and can only achieve a flat and unconvincing effect. She reasonably maintains the omniscient point of view, which directly conveys the characteristics of Roger Fry to readers who have no need to interpret the image of Roger Fry behind the language like a detective. Woolf is
generous in her praise of Fry’s noble quality. She writes directly with the omniscient point of view that Fry is incredibly sincere and earnest about people and art. “But with it was combined another characteristic—when he had sat long enough at those feet to see where they led, he would get up and go off, sometimes in the opposite direction” (Woolf, 1976, p. 86). Fry does not submit others’ artistic opinions without thinking, but dares to question and oppose them if he has a different opinion. “If by tact was meant flattering the susceptibilities of officials, was not always at his command” (Woolf, 1976, p. 136). He could not be worldly or even hypocritical in his dealings with people. Then the author veers abruptly to the first-person point of view to describe Fry’s thoughts. Through indirect inner monologue, author allows the subject to achieve his self-disclosure. Readers do not passively accept the author’s presentation of the inner world of the characters. Instead, under the guidance of the narrator, readers use their own wisdom and judgment to reconstruct the inner reality of Roger Fry. “It gives me power with the Director and Assistant Director to withdraw pictures—to restore them—to repaint galleries and it establishes the idea of serious as opposed to frivolous art” (Woolf, 1976, p. 136). Fry delights in having the power to deal with pictures and galleries, and dismisses dull works of art showing. It reflects his pursuit of art and his unique aesthetic ability. At the same time, Woolf adds direct inner monologue to have a further explanation of Fry’s mental activity. “His hopes were high. He did not regret that he had closed with the American offer, in spite of the fact that overtures were still made him from home” (Woolf, 1976, p. 136). The next point of view switches to Pierpont Morgan, the president of the metropolitan Museum, whose main focus is profit not the quality of a work. Woolf describes that “He was a Cheque-book collector… He bought it batches.” “Besides advice he required flattery” (Woolf, 1976, p. 137). His disrespect and insincerity for art and people strike a sharp contrast to Fry’s seriousness and purity, which serves as a foil to Fry’s sense of mission and responsibility as an artist.

Another skill of novel writing that Woolf applies to her Biography creation is the narrative strategy of meta-novel. She clearly presents the process and fabrication of biographies writing. Patricia Waugh believes that the writing of meta-novel shows the routine of novel creation, clearly presents the status of creation behavior, and thus explores the relationship between truth and fiction. If we call a novel that narrates the creation of a novel a meta-novel, we can also call a biography that deals with the creation of a biography a meta-biography, whose main feature is to expose the fiction of biography. In order to make readers achieve a “real” reading effect, traditional biography consciously hides the existence of the narrator and highlights the “authenticity” of biography. In the narrative process of meta-biography, the author exposes the creation concept and frankly admits the “fiction” of biography to the readers. In Roger Fry, we can see Woolf reminds the readers as follows, “The agony that lay behind those words cannot be described but it cannot be exaggerated” (Woolf, 1976, p. 103). “Only one subject seemed to escape his insatiable curiosity; and that was himself. Analysis seemed to stop short there. Perhaps human nature, until we have more knowledge of psychology, is inexplicable” (Woolf, 1976, p. 289). She seems to directly tell readers that the psychological world of Roger Fry is elusive private territory. The only thing she can do is using real materials to create fiction so as to combine the rainbow of imagination with the reality of life.

Woolf’s material processing and narrative strategies in Roger Fry express her writing personality. She endows the biography with literariness so that it is no longer dull as a historical reference book, but filled with the sense of literary appreciation with her exquisite writing skills.
4. Conclusion

Woolf strikes a relative balance between history and literature in Roger Fry. She strictly records life of Fry in chronological order and fully respected history in face of most important life experience so as to restore the truth of his life and artistic perception. However, Woolf’s creative pursuit is to integrate her writing skills and literary imagination to biographies. She cuts out unimportant facts and fills in necessary details by using modernist writing methods such as multiple point of view and psychological description. We can conclude that it is an experimental work of Woolf’s new biography, which contains both rigorous facts and writer’s individuality expression. Different from Woolf’s other works of fiction in the name of biography, Roger Fry: A Biography restrains Woolf’s excessive creativity and imagination, thus forcing her to give proper play to her subjective creation within the framework of biography.

References

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