

A Bakhtinian Carnavalesque Approach to Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts

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Abstract: In *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf creates a vivid portrait of a world in which social hierarchies disintegrate, conventional standards are challenged, and satire has a significant impact. The story erases social boundaries and places a priority on critical thinking while enveloping readers in a joyful and jubilant atmosphere evocative of carnival. Woolf uses satire and parody as tools to examine societal conventions, topple hierarchies, and provide readers a critical viewpoint by questioning them, welcoming change, and challenging the current social order. This activity invites readers to consider and assess the current social structure. Through its depiction of a chaotic village pageant, the transforming potential inherent in the carnivalesque setting, and the purposeful use of satire and parody as carnivalesque methods, the work successfully depicts these dynamics. These components work together to encourage readers to question and carefully examine the tenets of the existing social structure and to assist social critique.

Keywords: Carnavalesque, Satire, Parody, Social Norms, Identities

Öz: *Between the Acts* adlı eserinde, Virginia Woolf, toplumsal hiyerarşilerin dağıldığı, geleneksel standartların sorgulandığı ve mizahın önemli bir etkisi olduğu bir dünyanın canlı bir portresini çizer. Hikaye toplumsal sınırları siler ve eleştirel düşünmeye öncelik verirken okuyucuları bir karnaval havasında sevinçli ve neşeli bir atmosferle sarmalar. Woolf, toplumsal normları sorgulamak, hiyerarşileri devirmek ve okuyuculara eleştirel bir bakış açısı sunmak için mizah ve parodi gibi araçlar kullanır. Bu etkinlik, okuyucuların mevcut toplumsal yapıyı düşüncelerini ve değerlendirmelerini teşvik eder. Kaotik bir köy festivali, karnavalesk ortamın dönüşüm potansiyeli ve mizah ile parodiyi karnavalesk yöntemler olarak bilinçli bir şekilde kullanma, eserin bu dinamikleri başarılı bir şekilde betimlemesini sağlar. Bu unsurlar bir araya gelerek okuyucuları mevcut toplumsal yapıyı sorgulamaya ve dikkatlice incelemeye teşvik eder ve sosyal eleştiriye yardımcı olur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karnavalesk, Mizah, Parodi, Sosyal Normlar, Kimlikler

Between the Acts is the final novel written by Virginia Woolf, one of the most significant writer influencing the modernist literature throughout the 20th century and it's published in 1941, a year after Woolf's death. While the novel represents Woolf's observations on society, the concepts of time, memory, and the essence of art are also explored.

Set around the organization of a village pageant by the Oliver family on their estate the Pointz Hall, *Between the Acts* takes place in the English countryside during the summer of 1939, right before the onset of World War II. The plot centers around a pageant which brings together the characters from different caste and covers many periods from ancient Rome to the present.

In *Between the Acts* Woolf explores the complexity of the human experience and offers deep insights into the characters' inner lives through the stream-of-consciousness technique, skillfully interweaving the inner thoughts, perspectives, and memories of diverse characters within the narrative.

In order to question social norms, undermine existing hierarchies, and offer biting satire and parody as weapons for social critique, Woolf uses the carnivalesque aspects of the pageant.

Although the novel might be understood as an examination of individual and group identities, it also engages in bigger social and political issues.

The Mikhail Bakhtinian carnivalesque method, which was influenced by the Russian literary theorist, emphasizes the temporary suspension of social standards and the subversion of social hierarchies through festive and chaotic social events. Virginia Woolf uses this strategy in *Between the Acts* to question and criticize the social structure that is already in place.

According to Bakhtin, carnival is a time and place of emancipation where people can momentarily escape restrictions of society and engage in actions that are not appropriate in normal circumstances. Among other forms of subversion, the carnivalesque setting encourages the reversal of roles, the celebration of physiological processes, and the parody of authorities.

The village pageant is the main carnival-like event in *Between the Acts*. Woolf disrupts the established order with a disorderly and disruptive spectacle. Participants in the pageant play roles that are at odds with their

typical social standing. As said by Bakhtin, "Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, 1984).

Additionally, the novel's carnivalesque setting encourages the discovery of other identities and the release of suppressed urges. Characters have the ability to briefly remove their social masks and participate in actions that go against what society expects. As Bakhtin states, "It [carnival] is a special form of communication in which personal relationships are abolished and people enter into contact with one another on the basis of equality" (Bakhtin, 1984).

Along with other carnivalesque devices, Woolf uses satire and parody in *Between the Acts*. As Christopher Ames states,

The humor of Woolf's village pageant itself grows initially out of the double focus of the stage, which in turn points outside the pageant to the audience and the Point Hall residents. The Portrayal of Queen Elizabeth by Elize Clark of the tobacco shop illustrates one sort of comic double vision. The audience sees the stage figure as both Queen Elizabeth ("She looked the age in person" 83) and as the humble Eliza Clark. (Ames et al., 1998, pp. 395)

She exposes the absurdities and contradictions of societal personalities and events by criticizing and making fun of them through these literary devices. Bakhtin contends that satire and parody provide a critical lens through which to evaluate the dominant social order, highlighting the discrepancy between appearances and reality.

In short, Virginia Woolf's use of the carnivalesque Bakhtinian technique in *Between the Acts* examines societal conventions, challenges hierarchies, and offers a critical eye through satire and parody. The main carnivalesque event, the village pageant, allows characters to briefly escape social limitations and have transforming experiences. Woolf asks readers to question and critique the established order of society by utilizing the carnivalesque aspects, revealing its flaws and contradictions.

Through the portrayal of the Oliver family, who put on the pageant, Woolf challenges hierarchies. They are shown as imperfect and vulnerable despite their social standing and seeming authority. For instance, Mrs. Oliver is described as "a woman used to being obeyed" (Woolf, 1941, p. 8), however, when chaos and unpredictability take hold, her grip over the pageant begins to wane. Woolf questions the idea of unchallenged dominance. However, when chaos and unpredictability take hold, Woolf challenges the idea of unchallenged dominance and exposes the frailty of hierarchies by undercutting the authority of the Oliver family.

Additionally, by letting actors to briefly assume other roles and challenge their given positions in society, the village pageant itself challenges social conventions. Isa's persona, who portrays the queen during the pageant, serves as an example of this. Isa welcomes the brief release of the carnival and enjoys the power and attention that come with her role, despite appearing to be a modest and humble character in her daily life. Woolf claims, "The role suited her; she had never before felt the queen's scepter in her hand" (Woolf, 1941, p. 73). The novel highlights the flexibility of identity and challenges the fixed positions people are given in society through this subversion of roles.

The pageant also questions social mores by featuring taboo issues and daring performances. For instance, the pageant's depiction of historical events features violent, sexual, and dissenting political moments. Woolf claims, "Soldiers ravished the women, and the old women betrayed their daughters to the soldiers. The men roasted children alive" (Woolf, 1941, p. 69). Woolf challenges conventional norms of decorum and probes the limits of acceptability by portraying these divisive issues in the context of the pageant.

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf challenges readers to critically analyze societal customs and power systems by subverting hierarchies and hierarchy. By questioning the Oliver family's power, letting actors to take on alternative roles, and bringing up forbidden issues in the pageant, Woolf draws attention to the inequities and constraints built into the existing system.

By portraying the characters in the pageant as individuals, Woolf also questions hierarchies. The carnivalesque environment, according to Bakhtin, enables the temporary suspension of hierarchical status and privileges. Characters from diverse social classes compete in the pageant. In *Between the Acts*, eliminating distinctions in position and power. Characters like Mrs. Manresa, for instance, who usually plays a submissive position to her aristocratic husband, assumes an assertive role in the pageant, symbolically escaping the confines of her regular existence. Woolf claims, "Mrs. Manresa wore a crown and an ermine cloak; her voice was commanding. For a moment she felt what it was to be an aristocrat" (Woolf, 1941, p. 45). Woolf undermines the notion that social standing inevitably determines power and agency by subverting hierarchies.

Furthermore the pageant challenges social norms by giving people a stage to express their personality and desires in unexpected ways. Characters in the book are offered the chance to temporarily put aside their social positions and adopt other identities. For instance, Giles, a character who is often reticent and self-

conscious, embraces the carnivalesque attitude and participates in the pageant in a drag role. Woolf writes, "Giles came dressed as a girl in blue muslin. He wore powder and rouge and a birdcage with a canary in it hung from his waist" (Woolf, 1941, p. 72). By challenging the rigid expectations imposed on people by cultural conventions through this subversion of gender roles and self-expression, Woolf invites readers to reflect on and rethink their own identities.

David Mc Whirter expresses that he (Giles) only perpetuates the ethos of masculine violence which has engendered this monstrous birth, the patriarchal and fascist forces which have produced his own thwarted life. To Mc Whirter, a powerful critique of the patriarchal and oppressive forces that govern society that supports Woolf's goal of questioning societal conventions and hierarchies. It draws attention to the harmful effects of maintaining macho aggression and how it affects both people and society as a whole. (McWhirter, 1993, pp.79-80). This is brought up in the conversation to highlight the significance of Woolf's carnivalesque strategy for challenging and criticizing the established order.

The pageant's use of taboo themes and controversial performances also pushes the boundaries of social conventions. Themes of sexuality, violence, and political rebellion that are frequently hidden in traditional society are explored by Woolf in the carnivalesque setting. The pageant, for instance, features scenes of rape, violence, and political uprising that push the bounds of propriety and expose readers to unsettling truths. Woolf writes, "The barbarous chief carried off the beautiful captive... and the men roasted children alive" (Woolf, 1941, p. 69). Woolf challenges social norms of etiquette by addressing these contentious themes in the context of the pageant and reveals the sometimes hidden, darker sides of human nature.

The novel's carnivalesque setting gives the protagonists a transforming experience that allows them to rebel against social norms and explore alternate facets of their identities. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, is a time and place of emancipation where people can momentarily take off their social masks and engage in behaviors that are not appropriate in their regular lives. This momentary freedom gives one a feeling of empowerment and freedom. By creating a carnivalesque environment, Woolf invites readers to rethink possibilities that go beyond accepted social mores.

Isa's character serves as a good illustration of how the carnivalesque ambiance can affect a person. Isa tends to be quiet and passive in daily interactions.

She welcomes the carnival's transforming power, though, and assumes the queen's position during the pageant. Woolf states, "The role suited her; she had never before felt the queen's scepter in her hand" (Woolf, 1941, p. 73). Isa gains a sense of empowerment and a greater appreciation of her uniqueness as a result of this metamorphosis. She can temporarily shed her typical demeanor and explore a different personality in the carnivalesque setting.

As noted by Bakhtin, carnival is a period when standards are disregarded, hierarchies are reversed, and established authority are made fun of. Characters in *Between the Acts* act in ways that would be viewed as inappropriate in real life. For instance, there are scenes of wild partying, sexual innuendos, and irreverent acts in the pageant. Woolf claims, "They were letting themselves go... turning head over heels, lifting skirts, dancing on the green" (Woolf, 1941, p. 52). Characters are temporarily freed from the restrictions of society expectations thanks to the subversion of social norms occurring in the carnivalesque setting, which promotes a sense of regeneration and emancipation.

The novel's disruption of social positions within the pageant is another instance of how it questions established hierarchies. The distinctions between socioeconomic classes and backgrounds are erased as characters from all walks of life compete in the pageant on an equal basis. Characters like Miss La Trobe, the avant-garde artist, and the aristocratic Oliver family engage with one another in this way. Woolf writes, "She [Miss La Trobe] was treated by the Olivers, on the grounds of her celebrity, as their equal" (Woolf, 1941, p. 10). Woolf questions the idea that one's status or social position dictates their value or power by obfuscating the lines of social hierarchy. This subversion raises the possibility of alternate forms of social interaction by challenging the notion that social position defines worth or power.

The transformational experiences of the protagonists also highlight the carnival's theme of renewal. Isa's revelation when she accepts her position as the queen serves as an example of this rebirth. Woolf claims, "For a moment she [Isa] felt herself a being as real and as significant as any figure in history" (Woolf, 1941, p. 73). The characters have a moment of empowerment and self-realization at the carnival, which pushes them outside the boundaries of their routines and gives them a glimpse of potential futures.

Between the Acts challenges readers to reflect on and analyze the current social structure by using the carnival as a venue of transgression and renewal. Woolf highlights the limitations and unfairness of existing norms by questioning conventional hierarchies and social norms within the carnivalesque setting.

Satire and parody are used as carnivalesque elements in *Between the Acts*, where they are effective social critique instruments that upend the status quo. Virginia Woolf makes use of these literary devices to highlight

the absurdities and inconsistencies of societal figures and events, provoking readers to engage in critical thought about the preexisting standards and conventions.

Through exaggerated and distorted depictions of societal characters and events, satire and parody in "Between the Acts" serve as carnivalesque tactics. Through the use of these techniques, Woolf subverts the existing system and inspires readers to doubt the veracity and authenticity of the existing social order. As Bakhtin states, "Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" (Bakhtin, 1984). Satire and parody blur the lines between the critique's target and its audience, enticing them to actively participate in the critical analysis of societal frameworks.

The way in which the village pageant is shown is one instance of satire and parody used as carnivalesque tactics. The pageant scenes in the book involve exaggerated depictions of actual historical occurrences, like violent and political uprising scenarios. Woolf claims, "The scene became one of massacre... It was a time of bloodshed, murder, and rapine" (Woolf, 1941, p. 69). Woolf criticizes the idealized tales frequently connected with historical reconstructions and the glorifying of violence by presenting these events in a twisted and exaggerated way. Readers can critically consider historical narratives that create social memory and the manner in which they can be altered or manipulated for political or ideological goals thanks to the carnivalesque aspect of satire. By challenging the glorified narratives surrounding historical reconstructions and the glorifying of violence, Woolf pushes readers to face the paradoxes in the dominant social order.

While the novel's use of parody highlights the pretenses and flaws of the characters and their society, Woolf challenges people's illusions and the masks they present in social interactions by using parody to show the discrepancy between appearances and truth. For instance, the self-described intellectual Mr. Haines is made fun of throughout the book. Woolf claims, "He [Mr. Haines] prided himself on being a man of intelligence; but in reality he was a fraudulent humbug" (Woolf, 1941, p. 26). Woolf exposes the character's dishonesty and intellectual pretenses by highlighting the contrast between Mr. Haines' apparent intellectual superiority and his true lack of depth through this parody.

The novel's use of satire and parody by Woolf enables a critical analysis of societal figures by highlighting their flaws through exaggerated and distorted portrayals. The self-important landowner Bartholomew Oliver is one such instance. In his writing, Woolf uses satire to make fun of his exaggerated feeling of significance. "Bartholomew, as lord of the manor, looked down upon the common herd... He assumed a look of supreme complacency" (Woolf, 1941, p. 9). Woolf challenges the idea of inherent superiority based on social class and undermines the character's assumed authority by exposing his conceit and detached nature through this satirical portrayal. Woolf asks readers to critically consider the hypocrisy and unjust power dynamics prevalent within the society hierarchy by mocking Bartholomew's exaggerated sense of significance.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's application of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque approach in *Between the Acts* demonstrates the approach's ongoing influence on literary analysis while also holding considerable literary and societal relevance. Woolf's use of the carnivalesque technique, which challenges social norms, questions existing hierarchies, and encourages readers to critically reflect on the current order of society, is still a potent instrument for comprehending and analyzing the structures of society in literature and beyond.

The novel's carnivalesque style acts as a catalyst for societal conventions and established hierarchies to be questioned. Characters can escape conventional norms and explore alternate identities in Woolf's fleeting spaces she constructs. This brief freedom enables a clearer comprehension of the constraints and inequalities ingrained in the social fabric. As Bakhtin explains, "Carnival does not recognize any distinction between actors and spectators" (Bakhtin, 1984). Woolf asks readers to actively participate in the critical analysis of cultural constructions by obfuscating these boundaries.

The carnivalesque setting in *Between the Acts* has a tangible transformational force. Characters undergo periods of transgression and regeneration during the village pageant. They go against the grain of their assigned jobs, flout established hierarchies, and do things that are taboo in their regular lives. In addition to empowering the protagonists, this life-changing event causes readers to reflect on society's rigid social conventions and power systems.

In addition, Woolf might criticize societal characters and events by using satire and parody as carnivalesque methods. She draws attention to the flaws and paradoxes in the socioeconomic structure through exaggeration and distortion. Readers are encouraged to critically evaluate the truthfulness and applicability of social notions by using this satirical lens, and they are also prompted to consider the hypocrisies and power disparities that underlie the current system.

Between the Acts provides a stimulating examination of human existence by questioning social standards and encouraging readers to critically reflect on the current order of society. It challenges readers to consider the presumptions, power relationships, and customs that influence their daily lives. By using a carnivalesque style, Woolf challenges readers to reevaluate established norms, presenting them with alternate perspectives, and encouraging them to envision a future that is more fair and just.

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