

Modality in the Writing of Virginia Woolf

Abbigail Clark

This article analyzes the way that both deontic and epistemic modality function within the writing of Virginia Woolf to illuminate the female experience and communicate the complexity of truth. To the Lighthouse and A Room of One's Own serve as examples of how modals are instrumental in representing themes of the Modernist literary movement as well as the gender dynamics often displayed in Woolf's writing. This article ultimately concludes that modals as a grammatical structure are not only effective in communicating themes of uncertainty but also that they contribute to Woolf's unique writing style as an author.

This article will focus on the use of the modals *may*, *might*, and *must* and the different semantic implications of their deontic and epistemic uses within the works of Virginia Woolf. Woolf’s use of modality gives a distinctive voice to her characters, especially her female characters, allowing them to muse upon the epistemic forces that influence their lives—particularly socially enforced gender norms. Woolf is well known for her stream-of-consciousness style and her representation of the female experience; her use of modality contributes to this distinctive style. Woolf’s use of modality as a popular Modernist writer reflects the Modernist themes of uncertainty and disillusionment that stemmed from the devastation of World War I. Her writing exhibits how these postwar sentiments prompted Modernists to confront traditional ideas and question the relativity of truth. This article will identify the uses of modality in two of Woolf’s works, *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One’s Own*, to examine the consistent use of these modals across various excerpts of her work and to demonstrate a recurring pattern that represents her manner of writing.

Defining Epistemic and Deontic Modality

Modals are useful tools for expressing a speaker’s personal or logical understanding of a subject because they serve as a gradient between the positive and negative polarity conveyed by the words *yes* and *no* (Zupan, 2016, p. 7). There are several types of modality that create semantic nuances, and this article will analyze the difference between epistemic and deontic modality. Epistemic modality is concerned with the speaker’s assessment of truth value. It is a deduction of facts and knowledge that results in a conclusion. This occurs in *To the Lighthouse* when Mrs. Ramsay concludes that the men who work at the lighthouse “*must* be bored to death” (italics added) based on her knowledge that they sit “all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp and trim the wick and rake about on their scrap of garden” (Woolf,

1927, p. 5; Zupan, 2016, pp. 6–7). Epistemic modality allows the speakers to acknowledge that there are circumstances of the human experience over which they have no control since they are forced to assemble meaning from the information available to them.

In contrast, deontic modality is the result of factors that condition a speaker's attitude external to the subject. It differs from epistemic modality in that it communicates an opinion or estimation based on the speaker's feelings rather than making an assumption based on evidence. Deontic modality is present when Mrs. Ramsay imparts her perspective to her daughters after pondering how she might cheer the lighthouse keepers in their supposedly pitiable condition. She says, "One *must* take them whatever comforts one can" (Woolf, 1927, p. 5; Zupan, 2016, p.7; italics added). Here, deontic modality illustrates that our personal opinions and philosophies are also influenced by the truths we choose to believe since Mrs. Ramsay wants to provide the lighthouse keepers with items of comfort because she sees their position as a sad and lonely one. These two modalities are useful in distinguishing types of truth and in recognizing that the qualification of truth depends on observation and experience. Both the truth gleaned from Mrs. Ramsay's observation and the belief that she asserts contribute to the Modernist perspective that life is uncertain and that the world is made of our own perceptions.

Functions of Modality in *To the Lighthouse*

While the section above utilized excerpts from *To the Lighthouse* to define epistemic and deontic modality, this section will explain exactly how the grammatical structure is effective in defining truth and conveying themes of uncertainty in the text. *To the Lighthouse* centers on the relationships and revelations of the Ramsay family and their guests that are revealed by events surrounding the desire for a trip to the nearby lighthouse. The novel emphasizes Mrs. Ramsay's central role in her family and community by paying

particular attention to how her presence and absence are both keenly felt by the other characters. Woolf employs epistemic modality as Mrs. Ramsay assesses her appearance: “When she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she *might* have managed things better—her husband; money; his books” (Woolf, 1927, p. 6; italics added). Her weathered visage leads her to deduce that she might have spent her life differently. The modal *might* conveys the uncertain conclusion that she draws from the evidence present and illustrates both the Modernist tendency to question and a woman’s individual insecurity in her role and purpose.

Woolf also implements deontic modality in *To the Lighthouse* to portray how modals can convey resistance to negation and exemplify gender norms. Toward the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay’s son James wants the family to venture out to the lighthouse. When he initially asks his mother if they can all go, her response is, “Yes, of course if it’s fine tomorrow” (Woolf, 1927, p. 4). However, her positively polar statement is refuted by her husband and their guest, Mr. Tansley, who claims that the weather will not be fine and that “there’ll be no landing at the lighthouse tomorrow” (Woolf, 1927, p. 7). While they use epistemic modality with the word *will* to indicate that the trip is not possible, Mrs. Ramsay uses deontic modality in saying, “But it *may* be fine—I expect it will be fine” to resist their negation and convey her optimism that the trip to the lighthouse could still be possible (Woolf, 1927, p. 5; italics added). The use of the word *may* in her response opposes the men’s supposedly logical conclusion that the weather will not be suitable for the trip and implies a refusal to accept their negativity as truth. Her resistance to their statement of certainty distinguishes her from the men, portraying her, a woman, as hopeful while painting both of the men as doubtful and stagnant. Here, Woolf uses the language of her characters, especially their use of modality, to highlight distinctive characteristics of the genders and imply that uncertainty can portray hope as well as doubt.

Functions of Modality in *A Room of One's Own*

Within *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf discusses the societal pressures that make it difficult for women authors to have the same opportunity and notoriety that a man might have, even though they may have the same degree of talent and ability. She also discusses the things that a woman must have in order to become an accomplished writer. She uses epistemic modals to define what exactly is meant by the phrase “women and fiction” (p. 1). The modals *may* and *might* allow her to grasp at the meaning of this specific term:

Women and fiction *might* mean, and you *may* have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it *might* mean women and the fiction that they write; or it *might* mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it *might* mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. (Woolf, 1929, p. 1; italics added)

This instance demonstrates her use of epistemic modals because she is considering several factors and attempting to conclude what is meant by “women and fiction” (p. 1). The use of epistemic modality contributes to her theme of uncertainty regarding what is expected of her as a female author and what is expected of female authors in general. This usage aids in the construction of the recurring theme of gender roles in her writing and displays the disparity between men and women in literature as well as reality.

While Woolf employs epistemic modality in *A Room of One's Own* to exhibit the ambiguity of women in fiction, she utilizes deontic modality to indicate how women are to emerge from ambiguity. The modal *must* is particularly expedient in enabling her to express her view about what is necessary for women to create fiction. Woolf (1929) writes, “A woman *must* have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved” (p. 1; italics added). In this sentence, *must* conveys deontic modality because it establishes

Woolf's opinion. Her attitude implies that this is likely not a reality for most women but that it should be. The modal *must* makes this distinction between positive and negative polarity and perpetuates the uncertainty of reality. It also indicates that a room of one's own is something that should exist for every woman, though there is no indication that it does exist in actuality. The modality of this statement challenges tradition as is typical of the Modernist view of the world, portraying the disorder of life while the questions of women and fiction go unanswered.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf consistently utilizes both epistemic and deontic modality in her work to convey the uncertainty that was characteristic of the Modernist literary movement and to create her own unique style. She uses modals to highlight characteristics unique to men and women respectively, which contributes to her persistent attempt to portray the female experience and the relationships between men and women. Her use of modality enables her to insinuate that truth is equivocal and is dependent on the life experience of each individual.

References

- Woolf, V. (1927). *To the Lighthouse*. Harcourt Inc. <https://books-library.online/files/books-library.online-12222244Ln8Z4.pdf>
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt Inc. <https://victorianpersistence.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/a-room-of-ones-own-virginia-woolf-1929.pdf>
- Zupan, S. (2016). Epistemic modality in translation: Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, 41(1), 5–24. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24721844>

