



Q3. Discuss Carry van Bruggen as an experimental writer of both short stories and novels.

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"It appears likely that poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning." T.S Eliot, 1921¹

In the above quotation, taken from his 1921 essay 'The Metaphysical Poets', T.S Eliot perfectly encapsulates the sense of rapidly spiralling complexity and diversity perceived by artists, writers and poets in the opening decades of the twentieth century, and subsequently reflected in the forcefully innovative and provocative nature of their artistic output. 'Modernism', in so far as the term may be used in an overarching sense to describe a broad range of experimental schools of thought and artistic practice, had by the time of van Bruggen's death in 1932 made its presence felt across the numerous literary cultures of Western Europe. Hermans has argued that the path taken by modernism in the Netherlands was a unique one, given the particular circumstances it inherited from the previous century, such as the Tachtigers, as well as its unique geographical position allowing writers to absorb the competing influences of British, French and German experimentalist schools simultaneously.² Of particular interest in this essay is the relationship of these innovative schools to the work and thought of Carry van Bruggen, in whose oeuvre it is possible to detect much experimentation and innovative technique, in a pattern of rapid expansion from her earliest works such as *De Verlatene* (1910) and *Heleen* (1913), through to her politico-philosophical essays *Prometheus* (1919) and *Hedendaagsch fetischisme* (1925), and finally to her collection of short stories *Avontuurtjes* (1922) and magnum opus *Eva* (1927). In this essay we will begin with a brief outline of Modernism, so as to ascertain what exactly we mean by 'experimental writing', and furthermore to clarify exactly which elements of van Bruggen's writing qualify as such. Furthermore, we will remain cognisant of the specific literary conditions of the period in which she was writing, so as to understand the extent to which her writing constitutes an innovative break and new direction away from her immediate cultural milieu. We will then move on to consider in detail the specific aspects of her works, which illustrate her gifts as an innovator and lumière, focusing in particular upon her short stories, as well as her final work, *Eva*.

¹ Butler, C. (2010). *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p1.

² Hermans, T. (2009). *A Literary History of the Low Countries*. Rochester: Camden House. p455.

We begin with a consideration of Modernism and experimental literature in relation to both the life and works of Carry van Bruggen. In his introduction to *Modernism*, Butler stresses the need to distinguish between 'modernism' and 'modernity', the latter that he categorises as,

“the stresses and strains brought about within this period [1909 to 1939] by the loss of belief in religion... dependence upon science and technology.. commodification brought about by capitalism... the invasion of bureaucracy into private life, and changing beliefs about relationships between the sexes.”³

He stresses that 'Modernism' constitutes the interaction of innovative techniques with modernist ideas, with a resulting great divergence from the “19th-century realist norms, upon which we still generally rely to understand the world.” He references the novels *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina*, which, although progressive in their female subject matter, come to us from a “relatively stable intellectual framework” with a “perspicuous, and morally authoritative narrator” who evokes a world “we are expected to recognise”⁴. This contrasts violently with modernist works, which, through their use of a magnitude of experimental, alienating techniques, aim to banish the moral certainties of nineteenth century positivist-realism, and instead present subjective experience in all its glory. Gera and Sneller state,

“modernisme betekent dat zekerheden en.. structuren ondermijnd werden. Morele postulaten.. werden eveneens in twijfel getrokken en meer situationeel bepaald... kenmerkten modernistische teksten.. zich door een veranderde opvatting over het zelf, tijd en ruimte. Het zelf werd niet langer beschouwd als de kern van de persoonlijkheid, maar als een subjectief registerende, altijd veranderende entiteit. Tijd en ruimte waren geen vaste, objectieve punten meer, ze worden nauw verbonden met en zijn afhankelijk van de subjectieve ervaring”⁵

Of particular relevance to van Bruggen is the genesis and fusion of profoundly new ideas, concerning sexual identity, the self, and the unconscious, taken from authorities such as Nietzsche, Freud and Einstein, which effectively fuelled an intellectual revolution among writers of the period. As we will demonstrate with her writings, the emphasis in Modernist works lay firmly upon the power of the progressive intellectual breakthrough, centred upon profound paradigmatic shifts in innovatory opposition to that which came before. We will present evidence of such shifts through textual analysis of van Bruggen's works, focusing particularly upon features such as the presentation of narrative structure, the symbolic power of epiphany and allusion, and subjectivity

³ Butler, C. (2010). *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p2.

⁴ Butler, C. (2010). *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p2.

⁵ Sneller, A and Gera, J. (2010). *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek*. Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren. p124.

with regards to moral and ideological absolutism, in particular the tension between the collective and individual and the relationship of the individual to the urban space.

Of the numerous modernist techniques employed by Carry van Bruggen in her works, her experimentation with narrative structure is perhaps the most striking and immediately arresting to the reader. Fenoulhet considers van Bruggen's experimentation with narrative strategies to be her "foremost contribution to Dutch literature", stating "her insistence on a woman or child-centred perspective forces readers to adopt a new reader position which is not voyeuristic".⁶ This refers to the shift in van Bruggen's writing from her early social realism and naturalism towards a markedly more subjective, modern style. If we take the example of her 1910 novel *De Verlatene*, the narrative structure is linear and remains in third person, interspersed with clearly defined dialogue, with the result that the narrator is presented as a detached but emotionally engaged, somewhat omnipresent voice presiding over the action of the story. The position of the narrative is thus descriptive, fixed and stable, evoking Butler's earlier description of a relatively "stable intellectual framework" to depict a world we are expected to recognise. The narrative functions somewhat as a proscenium arch for the action of the story, framing the setting for the reader, as demonstrated in the opening lines of the novel,

"Het regende nog steeds, al van vroeg-ochtend af...De kleine gele klinkertjes van het buurtje had hij schoon gespoeld, hier en daar klare plasjes vormend, waarin zich de hooge, blauwbonte lucht spiegelde."⁷

This stability of structure underpins the story's stable intellectual framework, as although van Bruggen's novel depicts the schismatic tensions within Dutch Jewry between Orthodoxy and the growing influences of Secularism, Zionism and Socialism, one could argue that the actual structure of her novel does not actively reflect this tension, remaining a detached, positivist depiction of a social condition. Fenoulhet draws our attention to van Bruggen's 1919 novel *Het Joodje* as evidence of development, with the narrator bringing the reader closer to the protagonist, Bennie, through use of a restricted viewpoint, yet ultimately remaining omnipresent and detached in the third person. A turning point in van Bruggen's writing comes with *Het Huisje aan de Sloot* (1921), the first of her Jewish works to be narrated purely from the internal perspective of a child. The sheer innovation of this technique is evoked by reference to Van Eeden's symbolist *De kleine Johannes* (1884), which dealt with similar childhood themes solely from an adult perspective, thus

⁶ Fenoulhet, J. (2007). *Making the Personal Political, Dutch Women writers 1919-1970*. Oxford: Legenda. p49.

⁷ Van Bruggen, C. (1910) *De verlatene. Een roman uit het Joodsche leven*. Amsterdam: Maatschappij voor Goede en Goedkoope Lectuur. p5.

failing to convey a child's subjectivity "completely consistently"⁸. Arguably the 1922 *Avontuurtjes* hover between van Bruggen's earlier and later novels, exhibiting highly modernist narrative structures, yet failing to effect the same intellectual bite with them as is achieved in van Bruggen's final work, *Eva*. The specific narrative structures vary across the eighteen short stories, ranging from strong stream-of-consciousness in *Waarom het niet mocht*, to *Vader's Boek*, which confusingly remains in the third person throughout yet feels disarmingly familiar and internal for the reader. Its structure illustrates perfectly T.S Eliot's point on the complexity of modernist literature, as it forces the reader to contend with an extremely fluid narrative structure, and a resultant high degree of movement between characters and themes; the result being a text with a high degree of thematic movement and an almost kaleidoscope sensual effect on the reader. Although they may not impede comprehension these techniques do demand a high degree of attention. Particularly worthy of comment is van Bruggen's achievement in depicting a third-person plural narrative in this story, evoking the voice of twins, perhaps young girls, as they observe the scene of Jewish family life around them. Finally, let us turn to van Bruggen's *Eva* (1927), which arguably constitutes the culmination of her earlier experimentation with narrative techniques to facilitate intellectual comment. Van Bruggen's mentor, Frans Coenen, described her female novels as heralding the "nieuwe ziel der menschheid" with their combination of "lyrical passages, reminiscent of Het Huisje aan de Sloot; abstract passages... and philosophical passages which seem to come straight from Hedendaags Fetisjisme or Prometheus"⁹. Carry van Bruggen tampers with the presentation of time, inverting the distinction between the work's reconstituted storyline (fabula) and the actual sequence in which it is set forth in the novel (syuzhet), so as to greatly increase the reader's experience of subjectivity within the narrative.¹⁰ Fenoulhet has thus characterised this novel as the final step in van Bruggen's fiction with its extremely unstable narrative structure and constant shifting between the intensely psychological first-person stream-of-consciousness and the third-person with interior monologue, thus fusing the borders between the third and first person in the mind of the reader as they move fluently between the two, effectively challenging the psychological distinction between the self and the immediate milieu. The result is an epoqne-shaking challenge to the concept of the self and its position within contemporary Dutch society, comparable in significance to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) or Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

⁸ Fenoulhet, J. (2007). *Making the Personal Political, Dutch Women writers 1919-1970*. Oxford: Legenda. p53.

⁹ Fenoulhet, J. (2007). *Making the Personal Political, Dutch Women writers 1919-1970*. Oxford: Legenda. p56.

¹⁰ Richardson, B. (2006). Making Time: Narrative Temporality in Twentieth-Century Literature and Theory. *Literature Compass University of Maryland*. 3 (3), p604.

The idea of the soul as a subjective entity and the degree of self-awareness one may consciously achieve as an individual level brings us to another theme prevalent in modernist literature, that of the epiphany. Butler argues that Modernism constitutes a confrontation between “high formalism” and “low popular content”, and it is possible to identify the concept of the sudden intellectual epiphany, such as that experienced by the protagonist of van Bruggen’s novel *Eva* in the final chapter, as an example of a traditional literary device being “exploited” by “a new language or syntax... in new principles of organisation”.¹¹ The use of the intellectual, pseudo-spiritual epiphany in this context may be read in the same vein as McGowan’s assessment of Woolf, Joyce and Proust when he states, “the moderns continue to rely upon significant moments as the climaxes around which to structure their narrative and lyric meditations... the central importance of epiphany ... also indicates that these modernists have not given up all desire to use art to gain access to truths hidden to ordinary perception.”¹² It is important to understand how Van Bruggen’s use of epiphany differs from that of her predecessors, given that the latter relied upon epiphany to reveal metaphysical or moral truths about the relation of the self to nature or other people. Instead, the epiphany in a modernist sense reveals hidden truths about the self itself, bringing to light what had previously remained unconscious or only dimly perceived. McGowan’s states “Modernist epiphany gains its significance within a larger struggle for the very meaning of the self in which an allegiance to rather traditional notions of the “soul” conflicts with a vision of a dispersed, transient emotions life that has no unifying centre.”¹³ This concept applies to *Eva* when we consider the extent to which van Bruggen does indeed present her protagonist outside of the traditional realm of the “soul”, and as a rather emotionally disparate entity uniting dispersed, transient emotions. In the final chapter of *Eva*, we witness the protagonist achieving a state of ‘Unio Mystica’, apparently through her shame-free, intensely liberating sexual encounter with Marius. Van Bruggen here uses the language of avant-garde intellectual-spirituality to express the tremendous sense of revelation experienced by her protagonist in this episode,

“mijn begrip mijn gevoel bekrachtigt, zoodat het nu pas wezenlijk mijn leven binnentreedt, waar gevoel en begrip niet gescheiden mogen blijven of Totaliteit verdroogt tot een woord... deze droom is geen bedrog... jij, mijn oude vijand Schaamte, nu zul jij mij nooit meer verontrusten. Jij, die mij overal dorst komen plagen, tot dáár....”¹⁴

¹¹ Butler, C. (2010). *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p6

¹² McGowan, J. (1990). From Pater to Wilde to Joyce: Modernist Epiphany and the Soulful Self. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. 32 (3), p418.

¹³ McGowan, J. (1990). From Pater to Wilde to Joyce: Modernist Epiphany and the Soulful Self. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. 32 (3), p419.

¹⁴ Van Bruggen, C. (1927). *Eva*. Amsterdam: Querido’s Uitgevers-MIJ. p

Thus, in the novel *Eva* we witness van Bruggen experimenting and reinvigorating the literary device of the epiphany, endowing it with a new meaning in the context of the metaphysical turn-within, to examine the nature of the individual human soul.

Finally, let us briefly expand upon the theme of intellectual and philosophical subjectivity and autonomy. Subjectivity is defined in a binary sense to objectivity as “ arising out of or identified by means of one's perception of one's own states and processes”¹⁵. Fokkema and Ibsch characterise her work thus as “an early example of the type of modernism ... which is characterised by intellectual reflection and a critical approach to the present.” Fenoulhet contrasts the purely subjective nature of *Eva* with that of *Heleen*, wherein; “Ina’s spiritual and mental existence is in the foreground... although the narrative still approaches this inner life from the outside”. Subjective experience, interpretation of events and anecdotal memory pervade every page of *Eva*. The protagonist’s gradual intellectual Bildung leads to the rejection of religion and its dogmatic sexual ethics, particularly the role Christianity exercises as the foundation of Western society and culture. This intellectual progression is made explicit at numerous points, for example, in chapter five as the protagonist is confronted with the dogmatic socialism of those in her social milieu¹⁶, and in chapter four when she is confronted with both the determinism of Arjen Brand and the dogmatic Roman Catholic ethics of her colleague Miss Korff¹⁷. Fenoulhet underlines the courage of van Bruggen’s stance with regards to challenging the intellectual status quo, drawing attention to her revolutionary depiction of breastfeeding and female bodily sensation in chapter six. Through this episode van Bruggen makes a “brave contribution to the rethinking of femininity”¹⁸, daring to traverse the nineteenth-century binary of the female as either Madonna or whore, instead “smashing the stereotype” by depicting the Madonna with baby at breast only to transgress by describing the resultant sensual pleasure. This has to be one of the most compellingly avant-garde images of the entire modernist period in Dutch literature, and is prime evidence of van Bruggen’s infusion of experimental elements deep into the fabric of this her final novel.

Thus, to conclude, we have considered the manner in which Carry van Bruggen could be considered an experimental writer, both in terms of her relationship towards a literary mainstream from which she was attempting to break forth, and furthermore, in terms of the specific methods

¹⁵ subjective. 2011. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved November 12, 2014, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hacker>

¹⁶ Van Bruggen, C. (1927). *Eva*. Amsterdam: Querido’s Uitgevers-MIJ. p122.

¹⁷ Van Bruggen, C. (1927). *Eva*. Amsterdam: Querido’s Uitgevers-MIJ. p89.

¹⁸ Fenoulhet, J. (2007). *Making the Personal Political, Dutch Women writers 1919-1970*. Oxford: Legenda. p59.

she employed in her works in order to do so. We have established that it is indeed possible to trace a distinct pattern of innovative movement from her earlier works, such as *Het Joodje* and *Heleen* through to her later works such as *Avontuurtjes* and *Eva*, and detect a strong pattern of evermore daring motifs, experimental techniques and avant-garde choices of subject matter. For this reason, it is thus possible to designate Carry van Bruggen as one of the most prominent Dutch writers of experimental novels and short stories in the early twentieth century.

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