



## The Vanity in the Selected Novels of Virginia Woolf and Sidonie Gabrielle Colette: The Literary Paintings\*

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THE themes and motifs related to the paintings of « Vanities » are used in literature in order to enrich the narratives and reflect the preoccupations of the characters. The Vanity provokes a meditation on death as well as on the ephemeral nature of existence through an allegorical representation of these spiritual themes, involving a sensual atmosphere and certain recurrent symbols. Venus or any other woman contemplating or admiring her reflection in the mirror, an hourglass as well as a burning candle reminding the passage of time, a skull or some withered flowers suggesting death and etc. are among the symbols one encounters in the paintings of « Vanities ».

This analysis studies the literary adaptation of the motifs of the Vanity in some narratives by Virginia Woolf and Sidonie Gabrielle Colette. As middle-aged women in their fifties, the major female characters of *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *Chéri* and *The Last of Chéri* by Sidonie Gabrielle Colette experience an identity crisis that leads them to ponder the transient nature of pleasure and beauty in life. In the first part of the article, we probe the Vanity motifs and images in *Mrs Dalloway*. We will find Clarissa Dalloway obsessed with the passage of the moments of life and mortality. An ill, middle-aged woman, Clarissa Dalloway sees death and the physical decline on others' faces as mirroring her own situation. Her

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meditations on time, death, life, and on the value of the present moment are represented as glorious discoveries on the nature of existence and the way towards self-discovery. In the present article, we will also study in detail how Virginia Woolf revives the Vanity symbols in a modern way through the images and meticulous vocabulary that remind us of certain paintings of « Vanities ». Besides, how Woolf represents social life and social gatherings, i.e. Clarissa's party, the major event of this novel, as the moment of reflection on social vanity and a critique of the society will be of interest in this study. The second part of this analysis focuses on the representation of the Vanity in Colette's novels. In her two selected works, the Vanity is present in the world of the coquettes for whom the physical beauty is of great importance. Léa is a woman surrounded by sensual pleasures of a bourgeois life. In the painting of « Vanities », the image of such a woman admiring her beauty in the mirror in a luxurious setting is set in contrast to the theme of the ephemerality of life that the Vanity arouses to meditate upon. In contrast to Clarissa who accepts her age and illness contemplatively, Léa has based her identity on the physical appearance and has thus difficulty accepting her age, her dead youth, and beauty. Conscious of the passage of time, Léa tries her best to escape such a fact and hide its effects on her body. In moving from *Chéri* to *The Last of Chéri*, the reader is capable of feeling the transience of time through the change of the era and the appearance of the characters. In *The Last of Chéri*, however, the preoccupation with death and the passage of time is more apparent for Chéri who has difficulty accepting the finished *Belle époque* after the war. The mirror serves as an essential object for the meditation of the characters on the vanity of life. In addition, Colette nourishes her works with pertinent symbols and an artistic sensual narrative style that lets the reader enjoy the same richness of sensual imageries existing in the painting of « Vanities ». Hence in this research, we study the sensitivity of the major characters to the passage of time and its effect on their self-consciousness as well as the style of writing and the imageries applied in each work in order to find out how Virginia Woolf and Sidonie Gabrielle Colette have created their own modern literary paintings of the Vanity in their texts.

**Keywords**— Vanity, death, passage of time, Virginia Woolf, Sidonie Gabrielle Colette, literary Paintings