

Narrative Technique of Virginia Woolf in Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract: British author, Virginia Woolf made an original contribution to the form of novel. She is distinguished feminist essayist, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, and a central figure of Bloomsbury group. Virginia Woolf's books were published by Hogarth Press, which she founded with her husband, the critic and writer Leonard Woolf. Born in a family with high literary and cultural standards, Virginia Woolf began her career by writing articles and essays for literary journals, and after her marriage she contributed liberally to the Hogarth Press, which published the works of the eminent men of letters of the day. Her reputation thus originally made as a critic of great insight and sound literary judgement. But she is best known as a novelist, and her reputation rests on a few novels.

Mrs. Dalloway is a stream of consciousness novel with a vigorous structure. The unique achievement of Mrs. Woolf in the novel is that she has succeeded in imposing form and order on what is, by its very nature, incoherent and chaotic. This is achieved by providing the novel with a narrow frame-work. There is skillful confrontation of 'psychological time' with 'clock time'. Whenever the London clocks strike we may be sure that there is going to be a transition from the past to the present, or from one personality to another. The omniscient narrator is not altogether absent, and reappears on the scene from time to time to guide the reader. This is seen in the frequent use of the pronoun *one* in place of *I*. Mrs. Woolf is concerned with the inner life of her character and with the external world in only so far as it impinges on the inner world. In other words, her purpose as a novelist is to render the 'psyche' or the 'soul' of the character.

Index Terms – Interior monologues, manipulation of time, symbolism.

Introduction

Mrs. Dalloway (1925) is one of Woolf's best novels. Set on a single June day in 1923, the novel tracks the parallel lives of two very different Londoners, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Clarissa is a 51-year-old socialite who is giving a party that night for her husband, Richard Dalloway, a Conservative Member of Parliament. In the only introduction Woolf wrote for any of her novels, she says that she originally intended that Clarissa would die in the novel, perhaps by suicide. At some point she decided to create another character who would be the one to die. This new character was Septimus Warren Smith, a 30-year-old, shell-shocked WWI veteran whom we first meet in the street that Clarissa Dalloway is walking down. Paralleling Clarissa and Septimus thus allows Woolf to play out a range of themes, while exploring the big topic that obsesses her in all her works, namely love, death and meaning of life.

In setting her novel on a single day in June in a city through which various characters work while we listen in on their thoughts, Woolf is alluding to Joyce's *Ulysses*, which had been published in 1922 and which she was reading that summer that *Mrs. Dalloway* began to take shape. The notion of connectedness, and especially of characters connected to each other at some deep level, is related to at least two narrative techniques that Woolf was experimenting in *Mrs. Dalloway*, free indirect discourse and "tunneling". The technique of indirect discourse becomes free indirect discourse when an author weaves a character's thoughts into the narrative in such a way that it is hard to tell whether they are the character's thoughts, someone else's thought about the character or the narrator's comments.

Stream of conscious technique

Mrs. Woolf belongs to the school "stream of conscious" novelists. She is one of those great English novelists of the 20th century who had the courage to break free from tradition, and then to give new direction, a new form and a new spiritual awareness to the English novel. She adopted the stream of consciousness technique in *Jacob's Room*. Her art rapidly matured in *Mrs. Dalloway* she is not the originator of the "stream of consciousness novel", but it is in her novel that this technique finds its balance. Stream of consciousness is a term that covers a broad range of different techniques. It can differ strongly from one writer to another. Woolf's ideas on Stream of Consciousness and her use of it are very different from Joyce's practice. Woolf believes that Joyce's work is 'confined and shut in', because the stream of consciousness of Joyce's novel is focused on one character at a time. But in her own work Woolf manages to go from one character to another without the reader being fully aware of it. She uses stream of consciousness as a liquid that flows her narrative and connects her characters. The stream of consciousness Woolf presents is a multiplicity of several characters and at the same time it unites all the individuals into a stream of life or an ocean of consciousness. All her characters are connected through their individual thoughts.

The three main characteristics of Woolf's particular style of stream of consciousness are narrator mediation, a unified style and switch off consciousness. Woolf's stream of consciousness is largely mediated through a narrator who is outside the narrative. The presence of the narrator can be seen in her use of tags such as 'she thought' and 'she wondered'. Narrator mediation is present in the stream of consciousness of every character. The mediation creates a unified style, which facilitates coherence between the different stream of consciousness present in the narrative. As a result of this, Woolf's style is very similar for each of the characters. The similarity gives a strong sense of connection between the characters and is exemplary of the cohesion Woolf attempts to represent in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The unified style of stream of consciousness is similar from character to character, which creates the possibility of moving from one character's consciousness to another without attracting attention to the transition. An example of a switch off consciousness can be found in the scene where Clarissa visits a flowers shop during the scene the stream of consciousness briefly switches from Clarissa to Miss Pym, the salesperson. In the sentence "very kind, but she looked older, this year," the focus of the stream of consciousness briefly switches to Miss Pym and switches back to Clarissa at "turning her head from side to side". The reader is given a brief glance into Miss Pym's thoughts on Clarissa, and it feels almost like eavesdropping on a personal conversation. Shifts similar to this one occur many time in the novel. This results in a sense coherence and stream of consciousness terms into a multiplicity, perhaps even a stream of life, as the consciousness of several characters are merged. In her Diary entry of August 30th 1923, Woolf writes that she has made a discovery: "how I dig out beautiful caves behind my character: I think that gives exactly but I want; humanity, hummer, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment". Later that year she refers to her discovery as her "tunneling process, by which [she] tells the past by installments, as [she] has need of it". *Mrs. Dalloway* is Woolf's 1st novel to which she apply her new technique. Woolf digs into the past of her characters and lets the tunnels she has created connect at specific moments in the narrative through for example imagery or echoing of thoughts.

Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness technique enables her to represent the multiplicity of the human mind and to forge past and present as well as psychological time and clock time. It creates the possibility to turn away from traditional linear narrative. The tunnels she excavated behind here characters surface suddenly in unexpected places in the narrative. It "[gives] the impression of simultaneous connections between the inner and the outer world, the past and the present, speech and silent: a form patterned like waves in a pond rather than a railway line". The image Lee uses, the patterns of waves in a pond, is very similar to the images of a spider's web, Woolf's image for literary fiction.

In an article on understanding *Mrs. Dalloway*, Anna Benjamin argues that in *Mrs. Dalloway* "the events are related as they apply to the present". Later in her article Benjamin suggests that "the revelation [of events] is not done in chronological order, but according to the significance of the past to the present". The key concept here is that 'events' surface in the story when they are relevant. The surfacing of events take place through recollections. The characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* are almost involuntary triggered into remembering events from the past by stimuli they receive in the present memory play an important part in Woolf's technique. Apparently the character walking down the Strand encounters something that makes Clarissa remember a moment in June. She is walking down the Strand and she is also on a balcony in June. Woolf then wonders which of the two images of the character is the true self, the image of the past or the image of the present.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the moments of interconnectedness happen to Clarissa when she recalls an event at Bourton, as she does in the opening scene of the novel. Clarissa opens the door to go out and buy flowers and she is suddenly overwhelmed by a memory of Bourton, triggered by a "squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now". Clarissa feels as she did that morning at Bourton, thirty years ago; her past self superimposes itself on her present self and they are briefly united in the person Clarissa is at that present moment. Besides memories that either connect tunnels or allows them to briefly surface, Woolf also uses several unifying element in her novel. These element are used to unite two or more characters and their consciousness, without the characters ever meeting or having a conversation. One of these unifying events is a car backfiring in Bond Street outside Mulberry's flowers shop. The backfiring car functions as a device to switch from Clarissa Dalloway to Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran suffering from shellshock. The scene begins with Clarissa standing in Mulberry's when she is startled by a sound from outside "oh! a pistol shot in the street outside!". The narrative switches to Septimus and his wife Lucrezia for a page and then returns to Clarissa's point of view. Clarissa and Septimus simultaneously experience the backfiring of the motorcar. Woolf represent the simultaneous experience by alternating between the perceptions of the different characters involved in the event and in doing so briefly connects the live of the characters.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf utilizes a multifaceted narrative technique of direct and indirect narration which absorbs us completely and illuminates the thought and feeling of the protagonists. The three protagonists in *Mrs. Dalloway* are initially on different level of consciousness- physical, complex and neutral. But this schematization diminishes when Clarissa and Septimus are diffused by their consciousness and Peter too finally reaches out to Clarissa's plane of consciousness. Their narrative thus conclude on a unitary whole. The novel commences with a glimpse into Clarissa's consciousness. Even though she was middle aged, "she felt unspeakably young" and "at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on". Clarissa can be visualized on a London street on a lovely day in June but harboring a whole lot of complexities in her subconscious. We also get acquainted with Peter, her former suitor, who had been away to India and her friend Sally Seton. She was infused in mankind but we can perceive only a fraction of her personality. Her inner being of course longing to preserve her own identity. She therefore envies the old woman opposite her house: "but love and religion would destroyed that whatever it was, the privacy of the soul".

Unfortunately her social existence denies this luxury of her individuality. She is surrounded by her satellites and the narration is unified by the adroit juxtaposition of her past and present. Her soliloquies give us a glimpse of her inner being. Socially, she holds a supremely regal position but in reality, she is a warm and affectionate person, even though she tries to maintain a snobbish attitude in her social relationships. Virginia Woolf herself was a very lonely and forlorn individual. Her physical problems had deprived her pleasure of motherhood and a normal marital life. Thus in the role of Clarissa, she pervades this narration with her self-dejection.

In her interior monologues we are aware of Clarissa's personality and also that of another individual who will complete her individuality, namely the unseen part of her being. He is Septimus who was bordering on a condition of insanity as diagnosed by the doctors and society. By this subconscious relationship, Clarissa achieves a sense of identity and finally Septimus's death redeems the hollowness, the corruption and the lies and the useless chatter of her life. Clarissa's relationship with her husband Richard was beautiful, all pervasive, with no binding on the surface but at heart, she could not transcend her inner barriers, desiring solitude. Projecting life in reality proves the depth and quality of artist's consciousness and Virginia Woolf justifies the concept perfectly.

Manipulation of Time

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is complexly connected to time. Virginia Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* about the perambulations of middle aged woman on a sunny June day in London, and it became one of the main Modernist classics. One of the most prominent themes in *Mrs. Dalloway* is time and distinction between two types of time. The clock measures time, but on the other hand time is represented by the duration of experiences as the human consciousness registers them.

The time told by the timepiece of the mind is called psychological time, a term taken from the philosopher Henri Bergson. Sitting in front of computer, staring at a blank screen for what feels like hours only lasted five minutes. A three-week holiday seemed to pass in a couple of days. It does not always matter what time it is according to the clock. The human consciousness has its Woolf time system, which registers the duration of emotions and experience. It does not rely on segmentation of time into minutes and hours. The time system of the mind is subjective and personal, whereas the clock represents time that is objective and public.

Time on the mind is also referred to as psychological time by thinkers such as the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Questions such as why the human consciousness is able to create an individual time-system and whether it can be influenced by external factors remain beyond the scope of this discussion. Clearly, the timepiece of the mind has always existed. Time is an important part of human consciousness. The Roman philosopher Plotinus was the first to name the phenomenon. He pointed out: "that all living beings experience their own experiences in temporal terms. [He] was the first to internalize the question of time".

Bergson thought reality was characterized by the different experience of time in the mind. Bergson used the term 'psychological time' to refer to this experience of time. Psychological time, according to Bergson, is not a different type of time, but a different manner of perceiving time. Psychological time is not subjected to chronology or linearity. It is concerned with memory, expectation, duration, extension, compression, and association; it moves in flux and is highly subjective. These characteristics make it difficult to pin down and even more difficult to represent in art and literature.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf explores the differences between the internal timepiece and clock time and illustrates how they are related. Woolf contrasts psychological time and clock time. Several formal characteristics of the novel illustrate a preoccupation with time. First of all, the working title of the novel was *the Hours*, which suggests an interest in the demarcations of time. Secondly, the narrated time of *Mrs. Dalloway* is a single day. The fact that the *Mrs. Dalloway* spans across one single day in the life of an ordinary woman indicates that the narrative does not focus on the chronological presentation of events. Arguably, not much happens during the day in June that is described in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The focus on the novel is on the consciousness of the characters. Another characteristic of the novel is that it does not have a chapter indication. It is presented as one large chapter entitled *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although the novel does not have chapter, the narrative is divided into units as Big Ben strikes the hours. Clock time divides the narrative into pieces. The lack of a chapter division in the novel also creates a continuous flow of psychological time.

Not only these aspects of the novel indicate an interest in time; time keeping devices, especially the clock of Big Ben, play a significant role throughout the novel. *Mrs. Dalloway* also has several stylistic features that suggest a preoccupation with time. As Mr. Tindall indicated, *Mrs. Dalloway* is a novel that is concerned with two different types of time and the tension that is created when they are juxtaposed. One of the most important images in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Big Ben, and not surprisingly it has several different functions within the novel. First of all it divides the novel into temporal units: "it was precisely twelve o'clock". Is the opening of a paragraph that is preceded by a blank line in the text? The time indication suggests a new episode. Big Ben also functions as a unifying element, and thirdly it creates a reality in relation to which the characters' inner experiences must be placed. Peter Childs argues that Woolf uses the striking of the Big Ben to contrast private with public time, which is essentially the same divide as psychological and clock time.

The striking of the clock "breaks up the novel into hours and sections". Breaks up the novel but it also breaks up the characters, psychological time flux. The chiming of Big Ben forms an intrusion into the thoughts and the lives of the characters, as they are reminded of reality. Anna Benjamin indicates why Virginia Woolf uses clock time.

Symbolism

To portray the different aspect of society Virginia Woolf uses certain characters symbolically. Hugh Whitbread represents, as Sally Seton thinks, that which is ‘most detestable in English middle-class life’. He is a man who has ‘read nothing, thought nothing’. He has the ‘manners and breeding of an English gentleman’. He is a perfect specimen of ‘the public school man’, a great ‘snob’, who has married ‘the Honorable Evelyn’ and found a little job at court.

Miss Kilman, whose love is not selfish whose religion is not pure, becomes a symbol of such impure sentiments as ‘domineering’, ‘indefinitely cruel’, and ‘unscrupulous’ love and religion. As these are ugly and unpleasant things, Miss Kilman, who symbolize them, is ‘Ugly, clumsy’, and shabbily dressed ‘in a green mackintosh coat’.

Similarly Peter Walsh, Sally Seton and Septimus Smith are used symbolically to suggest the adventurous, the unconventional and the visionary in society. As they cannot fit into the conventional society of London, one goes away to India, one lives in the country and the third commits suicide. Thus they seek to escape being Londoners who, according to E. M. Forster, are only countrymen ‘on the road to sterility’.

Besides employing characters to give us and insight into the various aspects of society, Woolf uses them to symbolize certain conditions and states of mind as well. The time of the day and the surroundings, too, are symbolic. The early morning is suggestive of her youth-the morning of life-and the flowers and trees with the smokes winding off them, the rooks rising, falling, which she watches as she stands with Peter, represent her feelings about a rosy budding life. The rising and falling rooks become external symbol of the rising and falling emotion that she was feeling in the presence of Peter who loved her and for whom she had tender feelings.

Some of the actions are also symbolic in nature. Peter’s different actions with his old “horn-handled knife”, which Clarissa could swear had these thirty years, symbolize his various emotions and attitude of mind. His extraordinary habit of playing with his knife stand for his silly unconventionality, his weakness, his lack of ghost of a nation what anyone else was feeling. Thus Woolf takes a fresh, almost revolutionary approach to symbolism. She deliberately obscures the pathway between signifier and signified and disconcerts the reader by taking old images and using them in a context. But probably her major achievement is to take traditional symbols and to deconstruct their previously unquestioned validity.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf has made use of many different technique in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* that disrupt linear time and create a sense of cohesion in the fragmented reality of the early twenty century. With her fiction she aimed at finding unity through interconnecting events and characters. She carefully construct a web-like structure for *Mrs. Dalloway*. She places the characters on the edges of the web and slowly the spiral towards the center. Beside the web like structure, Woolf used an abundance of different techniques to convey the characters’ connectedness, their thought and experiences. A stylistics feature that immediately attracts the attention is the fact that Woolf wrote her novel using stream of consciousness. Another device present in her novel is what Woolf herself referred to as tunneling. Yet another important method that add to the novel’s cohesion is repetition. The distinction between clock time and psychological time plays an important part in *Mrs. Dalloway* and Woolf uses several different technique to represent the flux of time and the stream of life that encompasses all her characters. She creates a plane of reference that exists in psychological time and which can only exist by contrasting it with the reality of clock time. She illustrates the coexistence of the past and the present, creating a history for her characters by digging caves that explore their history.

Reference

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