

Style and Technique of Virginia Woolf: A Critical Study

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Virginia Stephen (Woolf) 1902
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Abstract

Virginia Woolf was one of the most distinctive writers of the English Literature using the stream of consciousness technique masterfully. The stream of consciousness technique is one of the most challenging narrative techniques in writing. This study aims to focus on the teaching of the stream of consciousness technique taking Virginia Woolf's technical artistry in her use of sentence structure and vocabulary and in understanding Woolf's style better. In this study, I have dwelled on Virginia Woolf's three novels; *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. These are Virginia Woolf's well-known novels, which are considered to have established her mastery in the use of stream of consciousness technique in an effective way. However, in each of the novels, mentioned; a different way of the stream of consciousness technique is employed, which makes it peculiar and spectacular to Virginia Woolf. Although the works are in the form of prose, yet they are closer to poetry, especially *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. Her vocabulary choice and the sentence structure motivate the reader feel that he is reading a poem in the form of prose. This is related to Woolf's passion to find a new narration style. She combines poetry and prose so successfully that her works are both tempting and hard to read.

In addition, this paper is an examination of some of the techniques Virginia Woolf used in order to create poetry in the form of prose. The structures of balance and sound as well as the use of parenthesis are analyzed in this paper. The paper, while walking along the corridors of Woolf's mind, also explores her stream of consciousness technique.

Keywords: fictional portrait, stream of consciousness technique, parenthesis, feminism, style, symbolism, narrative technique.

Virginia Woolf came to life in the Victorian era in 1882. She was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in London in 1882. Her mother Julia Prinsep Stephen (born Jackson 1846-1895), was born in India to Dr. John and Maria Pattle Jackson and later moved to England with her mother, where she served as a model for painters. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen was a remarkable and notable Victorian intellectual. He wrote books in various disciplines; books on history, biography and philosophy. But his sixty-three volume *Dictionary of National Biography* which he edited, was the most famous of his accomplishments.

The large Stephen family lived in a house near Hyde Park in London. They were an upper-middle class family with important social connections both with artists and writers, such as the novelists Thackeray and Henry James, and with the social elite of judges, politicians and aristocracy. According to Woolf's memoirs, her most vivid childhood memories, however, were not of London but of St. Ives in Cornwall, where the family spent every summer until 1895, the date corresponding to her mother's death. The Stephens' summer home, Talland House, looked out over Portminster Bay, and is still standing today, though somewhat altered. Memories of these family holidays and impressions of the landscape, especially the Godrevy Lighthouse, informed the fiction Woolf wrote in *To the Lighthouse*.

As normal at that period, Virginia Stephens did not receive a formal education as it was the case for girls in the Victorian era. She and her sister Vanessa, with whom she was close all her life, had to make with an "at home" education while their brothers were sent to expensive schools. They were widely encouraged by their father to explore his extensive library. Vanessa became a well-known painter. She was among a group who introduced modern painting into England, a modernist in painting as was her sister Virginia in writing.

A series of deaths in her family deeply marked Virginia Stephen's life. In 1895, Virginia lost her mother when she was only thirteen. Her death had destroyed forever the family life which Virginia enjoyed cheerfully until then. Her half-sister, Stella Duckworth, took her mother's place in running the household, but just two years later, after two months of marriage, she died suddenly. The sudden death of her mother and that of her half-sister Stella two years later, led to the first of Virginia's several nervous breakdowns. She was, however, able to take courses of study (some at degree level) in Greek, Latin, German and History at the Ladies' Department of King's College, London between 1897 and 1901, and this brought her into contact with some of the early reformers of women's higher education such as Clara Pater, George Warr and Lilian Faithfull (Principal of the King's Ladies' Department). Her sister Vanessa also studied Latin, Italian, art and architecture at King's Ladies' Department. Nursed by Virginia, Leslie Stephen passed away in 1904 after a painful struggle against an illness. Her brother Thoby whom she admired suddenly died of typhoid fever. The death of her father in 1904 provoked her most alarming collapse and she was briefly institutionalized.

These deaths badly shook Virginia Stephen and deeply distressed her. She suffered her first serious breakdown in 1895 and her second after her father's death when she tried suicide by throwing herself out a window. At that time, she was seriously affected for many months. Hallucination and suicide attempts surrounded her depressive world. She tried to throw herself from a window. In 1910 and again in 1912 she was obliged to spend some time in a private rest home. A

year later, she was again severely ill for an important number of months. After 1916, her breakdowns became less severe.

The twentieth century Virginia Woolf's life was more intellectual than aristocratic. In fact, after the death of her father, she and her sisters bought a house at 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, a district containing the University of London and the British Museum. In 1912 Virginia Stephen married Leonard Woolf, a friend of one of her brothers at Cambridge. Their home became a meeting place for their brothers' friends from the University of Cambridge. There was formed what became known as the 'Bloomsbury Group'. This group of friends represented much of what was modern both in their rejection of the oppressive taboos of Victorian moral and The Bloomsbury Group or Bloomsbury Set was a group of writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists who held informal discussions in Bloomsbury throughout the 20th century. This English collective of friends and relatives lived, worked or studied near Bloomsbury in London during the first half of the twentieth century. Their work deeply influenced literature, aesthetics, criticism, and economics as well as modern attitudes towards feminism, pacifism, and sexuality. Its best-known members were Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, T.S Eliot and Lytton Strachey.

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf is considered to be one of the greatest twentieth century novelists and short story writers and one of the pioneers, among modernist writers using stream of consciousness as a narrative device. "Virginia Woolf's peculiarities as a fiction writer have tended to obscure her central strength: she is arguably the major lyrical novelist in the English language. Her novels are highly experimental: a narrative, frequently uneventful and commonplace, is refracted—and sometimes almost dissolved—in the characters' receptive consciousness. Intense lyricism and stylistic virtuosity fuse to create a world overabundant with auditory and visual impressions". "The intensity of Virginia Woolf's poetic vision elevates the ordinary, sometimes banal settings"—often wartime environments—"of most of her novels" (McTaggart, Ursula).

Generalising on the technique used by Virginia Woolf in her novels, J.K. Johnstone (p. 17) has written, that she "had always an ambivalent desire because of her vivid awareness of two worlds, one flowing in wide sweeps overhead, the other tip-tapping circumscribed upon the pavement." She, in other words, was aware of the realms of 'reality'- one that was outside in the shape of the various phenomena in Nature and Society, and the other inside the consciousness with its vast store of impressions, gathered at numerous significant moments of existence. The two realms have their meeting or converging points. Her main technique was to capture a converging point in time and from there work along the two realms, the mental and the material. The 'pattern' she attempted to build for her novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and much more so in *The Waves*, was this idea of starting from convergence, and then trace the lines of divergence along spatial and along temporal planes.

2. Virginia Woolf and Feminism

Virginia Woolf became one of the central subjects of the 1970s movement of feminist criticism, and her works have since garnered much attention and widespread commentary for "inspiring feminism", an aspect of her writing that was unheralded earlier. Her works are widely read all over the world and have been translated into more than 50 languages. Woolf is known for her contributions to twentieth century literature and her essays, as well as the influence she has had on literary, particularly feminist criticism.

Dealing with an author of Virginia Woolf's importance, it is first of all necessary to look closer at some aspects of her personal life, background, and critical thinking in order to understand her view on gender as portrayed in *Orlando. A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, the year after *Orlando*, seems to theorize what Woolf plays with fictionally in *Orlando*, and thus the text presents in a sense of a critic's approach to the concept of androgyny. This also helps to explore how the character of Orlando can be seen as Woolf's fictional portrait of the androgynous. As Laura Marcus describes in "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf," the lines between Woolf's fictional and theoretical works are often rather blurred: "her novels take up the images and imaginings of her pamphlets and essays: her 'non-fiction' uses strategies more often associated with fictional narrative," (217). Besides highlighting several aspects, *To the Lighthouse* also explores the passage of time, and how women are forced by society to allow men to take emotional strength from them (Beja Morris)

Virginia Woolf is regarded as one of our foremost feminist writers, and has been praised both for her fictional and theoretical work. The feminist label has emerged mostly due to her essayistic writings, but as alluded to above, one can easily recognize Woolf's theoretical ideas and thoughts also in her fiction. Laura Marcus argues that the relationship between Virginia Woolf and feminism is of a symbiotic character. She explains how Woolf's works, both the fictional and the theoretical, centre around women: women's lives and histories, but also how feminist criticism has altered our perception and reception of Woolf as a writer (Marcus 209). It is indeed true that feminist readings of Woolf's texts exploded as the field of feminist criticism emerged, but nevertheless, as Woolf left behind for us not just novels, but also critical texts to support her legacy, one can truly say that Woolf was a feminist writer.

3. Stream of consciousness technique

The Stream of Consciousness mirrors an enlargement of technical procedures. As a type of narrative it is a new and radical development from subjectivism. Its most important feature is exploitation of the element of incoherence in our conscious process. The Stream of Consciousness novel is not a story told in chronological sequence. "It is like a view of the earth's strata exposed by a geologic experiment. Or rather, it is like a movie picture which makes plentiful use of cut-back, symbolic themes and dissolving vies" (W.R. Goodman, p. 546). The phrase 'stream of consciousness' as a literary technique was first used by William James and became widely adopted as a term of art in literary criticism during the twentieth century, especially in the novels of Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, or James Joyce, among others. In these works of art, the inner life of the characters is illustrated by the writer as a combination of their sensations, memories, thoughts, feelings and emotional conditions. This double quality of life is detailed by Woolf in her critical essay, *Modern Fiction*, where she argues that the task of a modern writer is to capture the "essential thing" which she describes as an "unknown and uncircumscribed spirit."

Woolf's use of the phenomenon "spirit" is broad in her essay: "life", "reality" and even "truth" are made synonymous with the "spirit" that fiction ought to embrace and convey. She sees reality as chaotic impressions perceived by the senses, taking place in the triviality and ordinariness of an everyday surrounding. On the other hand, there lies the inner life, the 'whatness' of life which is complex and fluid by nature. This inner reality exists along with the outer reality, the material surrounding of a person. She argues that in writing one has to imply mental impressions and represent the external, material reality in its detail at the same time. Only by presenting both sides can a writer capture the true nature of reality, the essence of our existence:

“Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?”

Here Woolf describes life as a “luminous halo” that surrounds us, something that cannot be defined exactly, neither can it be circumscribed by the materialistic everyday life. This “luminous halo”, the actual true reality can be comprehended by everyone, individually in a different manner — she argues. The notion of this true reality is based rather on one’s perceptions, impressions and experiences than on people’s general understanding and social system.

Virginia Woolf’s vision of life makes her lay stress on the fluidity of human personality rather than its fixity. For her, it is the subjective element that is all important. The soliloquies of the characters represent their stream of consciousness which flows so incoherently.

Stream of Consciousness technique finds beautiful exposure in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The novel opens with the interior monologue of a middle-aged woman who walks leisurely through a London street. She thinks of preparations for her party in the afternoon and admires the fine morning. Then there is a memory flashback, and she thinks of her life at Bourton 20 years ago and recalls Pete Walsh who loved her. Time montage and a free association of ideas and images determine the flow of her consciousness. The past, present and future amazingly intermingle in her egocentric consciousness. Later on, we move in space from the consciousness of Clarissa Dalloway to that of admirable effect in the Tenth Episode in *Ulysses*. He represents eighteen unrelated scenes taking place in various parts of Dublin at the same time.

4. Symbolism

In *Mrs. Dalloway* also Mrs. Woolf has not forgotten the use of her favourite symbols, the lighthouse, the wave, the voyage and the seacoast. Peter wanders back to his time spent in the company of Clarrisa and other young friends once upon a time in Bourton in Old Parry’s (Clarissa’s father) country residence. He remembers Clarissa’s old aunt, Miss Parry thoroughly conservative, refusing medicines and other modern amenities clinging to the past:

*She belonged to a different age, but being so entire,
So complete would always stand up on the horizon,
Stone-white, eminent, like a lighthouse marking some
Past stage on this adventurous, long, long voyage,
This interminable... (179)(4)*

The flower symbol is very significant in *Mrs. Dalloway*. When the lady starts walking along the crowded streets of London in the morning, it is to purchase flowers for her evening party. Richard Dalloway thinks of all sorts of presents for her on his way back home from lady Bruton’s Lunch. He finally decides on purchasing a bouquet of roses to be taken as a gift to Clarrisa which she proudly displays in the evening party on the mantel-piece. Late in the novel Elizabeth is instinctively compared by Walsh to the hyacinth flower, the very symbol of youthfulness.

In other novels like *The Waves*, there is the use of symbols derived from Nature—the sun rising from the morning slowly higher and higher until in the afternoon there is the fall towards the evening. There are the ‘waves’ which changes in other novels like *The Waves*, there is the use of

symbols derived from Nature-the sun rising from the morning slowly higher and higher until in the afternoon there is the fall towards the evening. There are the 'waves' which changes their rhythm every hour of the day, from the slow gentle rhythm in the morning to the roar and fury in the late evening and night. In *To the Lighthouse*, there is dominating of the 'Lighthouse' which stands sentinel over a dangerous submerged lock in the sea, with the waves dashing against it day in and day out, for years and years. The visit to the Lighthouse is an ordinary routine programme. But even the routine programme of a visit to the Lighthouse, rowing out to the sea a few miles, cannot be immediately carried out. When finally the trip is carried out by Prof. Ramsay, the family itself has lost Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew and Prue. The fall of the waves against the shore is brilliantly described in this novel as frequently as in *The Waves*-“the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, “I am guarding you –I am your support”...like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow.....”(5)

A remarkable point to note is that in Woolf's novels, symbolic objects and rhythmic devices usually differ. For example, in *To the Lighthouse*, the 'Lighthouse' has an extraordinary evocative meaning behind it. The relationship is between the material construction on a rocky promontory along the coast of the Lighthouse and the members of the Ramsay family. In *The Waves*, the birds which hover over the sea like herons and gulls have special significance. In these two novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, the 'sea' is an eternal presence keeping up a rhythm in Nature. Similarly “the apparent 'movements' of the sun in the firmament has the most basic of all rhythms to terrestrial existence” (N.S. Subramanyam, p. 137).

5. Poetic style

Virginia Woolf's style is poetic. The experience dissolved into fleeting glimpses is so organized that it assumes the form of lyric poetry. She used words in a way which may be regarded as poetic. The metaphors she has used linger long in the memory after the purpose which they serve in the novel has been forgotten. In the long meandering simile of the body lying in the sun on the beach she seems to live half in and half out in the world of metaphor. Her metaphors in the novels evoke in such scintillating ways that we find in poetry more vivid and startling than the metaphors of ordinary prose. For instance, “a great brush swept across through his mind like the pulse of a perfect heart of life struck straight through the street; then for that moment she had illumination: a match burning in a crocus, an inner meaning almost expressed”. These images are poetic of the type as “A bracelet of bright hair about the bone” or “I should have been a pair of ragged claws,” and cannot be said to belong to prose, “Life striking through London like the pulse of a heart, such an image one does not expect in a work of prose”. Her images are all drawn from the visible world. Her allusions and images, rhythms, refrains and metaphors, all of them join together to make her style poetic.

6. Narrative technique

Virginia Woolf held the firm view that the main motto of the writer is to bring out fully his or her own experience of reality of life before the readers, and leave them to draw their inference and enjoy whatever feelings are evoked in them. A work of art, like the novel, is the symbolic presentation of the author's mind communicating with the reader's mind. As such, Woolf's narrative style vividly indicates the manner in which the writer's experience is well channelized. Woolf's aim in her novels, employing delicate workmanship as possible the impressions individuals have within their minds – to quote Muller (p. 320): “with so fine an instrument at her command Mrs. Woolf achieves brilliantly

the end she set for herself; the imaginative recreation rather than the formal dissection of human experience.”

Another narrative style, which Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner and other modern writers have preferred, is to present each one of the characters to speak for himself, or herself, expressing the innermost feelings. In this method of narrative, external events only provide the links in the chain of episodes and the stimuli, as for example, in Mrs. Dalloway, external events like an advertising aeroplane letting out smoke in the shape of letters to popularise some commercial were to the London public, or a closed distinguished looking car moving slowly up the street, or a more serious incident like the suicide of Septimus Warren Smith. The novelist dwells more on what responses are created within the consciousness of characters rather than describe the event directly. External events like the aeroplane giving out “a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters”, call forth different reactions in different people. The sudden burst of the car’s engine makes Mrs. Dalloway walking down the street, jump in surprise as though a pistol had been shot. It makes Septimus, “aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazel eyes which had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too”(7) think of retributive punishment on this world for all its evils- “the world has raised its whip; where will it descend ?” The loud sound of a motor car engine sets off a series of waves within Septimus and the novelist brilliantly “expresses” through her imaginative style these vibrations within the poor Smith:

*The world wavered and quivered and threatened to
Burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he
thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at;
was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement,
for a purpose? But for what purpose?(18)(8)*

7. Conclusion

In summary, Virginia Woolf’s remarkable style was to bring out convincingly the rhythmic movements within the consciousness or the rhythm of the streaming of the consciousness, as a response to an external stimulus. Her novels seek to give fleeting glimpses into reality. She could not do it in ordinary prose. For doing it she needed the assistance of a style, which would be highly individualized and peculiar. She deals in her novels with human experience dissolved into tenuous insight, which had to be imparted a form and order into it by deft manipulation; she seeks to destroy or to transcend the dividing line, the horizon of experience, vision and understanding which isolate one individual from another, and to exhibit in its reality everything that contributes to the making of a human personality. It was not an easy task to accomplish, and for this she needed a new style, if the experiment was to succeed. She had to evolve a style of her own and she has done it. Her style is a really individual, peculiar style, in keeping with the task she had set herself to accomplish. Her style even in her novel, *Jacob’s Room*, is different from that of her contemporaries. This novel opens with the following sentence: “so of course wrote Betty Flanders pressing her heels rather deeper into the sand, there was nothing for it but to leave”. This is in contrast with the opening of Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh*: “when I was a small boy at the beginning of the century I remember an old man who wore knee breeches and worsted stocking, and who used to hobble about in the streets of our village with the help of a stick...” The two kinds of style are, it will be seen, poles apart from one another. The style of *Jacob’s Room* is rather experimental, it lacks balance and it abounds in extravagance and imperfection. The opening is unsatisfactory as it leaves much unsaid and often the novelist intrudes herself with confidential asides and rhetorical questions.

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Style and Technique of Virginia Woolf: A Critical Study

318