

Concept of Time in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: Bergsonian Study

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Abstract:

Time is an important element in modern literature, has always been one of the most important themes of Virginia Woolf's novels. The purpose of this paper is to look at Woolf treatment of the movement of time within the conscious mind in the novel in title of To the Light House by Virginia Woolf. One conclusion drawn from this study is that Woolf began to use time as a literary element, thereby decreasing her development of plot and characterization. A second conclusion is that she was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson and that consequently her writing increasingly reflects the fluid movement of time within consciousness. This paper demonstrates that Virginia Woolf used time as a formal element of narrative to show the relationship of time to human consciousness; and she never overlooked the fact that time moves human beings toward death. For Woolf, life is characterized by endless variety and movement. Its exquisite beauty is enhanced by knowing that we humans live short lives and lose everything when we die.

Keywords:

time; stream of consciousness; duration; memory

I. Introduction

Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay "Modern Fiction," "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (6). This single sentence has probably been quoted more than anything else Woolf wrote. It is used by a great many critics in their attempts to analyze her writing. Much has been written about this author's style since she began to write in the first decades of the twentieth century, and this quotation has been a point of reference used to support very different attitudes toward her work. To apply Woolf's interpretation of life, taken from her own words, is apt. As a novelist, Virginia Woolf would not limit herself to a chronological description of each gig lamp as it occurred in a lifetime; rather, she would reflect what she saw in luminescent haze: she would write of consciousness instead of being a storyteller, and she would be preoccupied with the "end" of awareness. Published in 1925, *Mrs. Dalloway* was the first of Woolf's novels to reject the traditional use of plot and characterization and instead explore the wandering of the conscious mind. Two years later, *To the Lighthouse* presented to the public another novel that not only departed from tradition as did its predecessor, but one that was as much lyric as narrative. Woolf presented the reality of the conscious mind, as she understood it. Just as Mark Hussey states, "Woolf's art remained constant throughout her life [even though] .. her angle of vision undoubtedly changed.... (xi). Thus it is that, this novel indicates a refinement in Woolf's approach to her art. As she discovered her own talents and inclinations as an author, her novels' structures altered while her themes remained similar.

In *To the Lighthouse*, as Mrs. Ramsey leaves the dinner table, she briefly surveys the room from the doorway and Woolf, as omniscient narrator, writes “it [the scene] had become, she knew, giving one last look over her shoulder, already the past.” While the event of dinner occupies the briefest space, the mental activity following Mrs. Ramsey’s meditation on time’s movement is dizzying: after hovering pensively in the present for a moment, her mind merges with the movement of trees outside the house before it flashes to memories of her parents and then returns to the present (168-171).

In novel, Woolf used time as other novelists might use characterization and plot, as a device to convey her themes. Specifically, a primary Wolffian theme is that time is an element with recognizable characteristics. An inseparable component of this theme is that human beings are earned along in this stream of time until they encounter death and are annihilated. While they live, humans experience glory and grief in a series of complex moments that may occur anywhere in time. (Woolf’s time is fluid, always moving steadily forward horizontally, but also moving back and forth at different rates along the same horizontal line.) For every mortal, carried toward the future, both joy and suffering are sharpened by an awareness of time’s inexorable forward movement, a movement that will result in an eventual end of consciousness. To believe about Woolf, as does Shiv Kumar, that “All her literary experiments as a novelist can be explained in terms of Henri Bergson’s *la duree*” (62) seems reasonable. For Woolf’s novel studied here show a steady turning away from chronological (material) time to the psychological (spiritual).

II. Review of Literature

For Woolf, life is characterized by endless variety and movement. Its exquisite beauty is enhanced by knowing that we humans live short lives and lose everything when we die. We are terrified by thoughts of non-being and clever in our attempts to live for the moment, postponing our acknowledgment of death. To save ourselves from the paralysis that accompanies dwelling on death’s power, we create what will be referred to in this paper as “illusions of permanence,” distracters such as customs, ceremonies, and institutions that allow us to believe, for a while, that our lives are meaningful and that we will endure forever. In spite of our subterfuge, time and reality constantly erode our illusions, and people must find something external to themselves, something seemingly fixed and steady that holds time still. These points of reference become “centers” around which chaotic, disturbing life undulates and shimmers. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand why critics might interpret Woolf’s depiction of time in different ways because she is such a complex writer. Most critics recognize that Woolf moves in a linear mode within the framework of her narrative, from past to present to future, but beyond that consensus there are many variations in interpretation. Most important, though, to understanding Woolf’s concept of time is understanding Henri Bergson’s presentation of time as *la duree*. And its obvious impact on her writing.

Bergson, the French philosopher (1859-1941) who revolutionized the perception of time, had a profound impact on early twentieth century artists, and Woolf was certainly affected by his theories. Bergson said that time’s duration does not consist of a string of fixed points; rather, its essence is “to flow” (10). Bergson says, “is flux, the continuity of transition, it is change itself that is real” (16). This new concept of time, one that negated the vision of time as a mathematical straight line (Bergson 11), was known as “*la duree*,” the duration of time, by the artists of Woolf era. Chronological time, the space occupied by events or human activity, is “matter.” Psychological time, the space occupied by the mind in its perceptions, its memory, its feelings, is the type of time Bergson viewed as “spiritual.” According to Kumar, *la duree* becomes a fourth dimension (62-64). Jafari and Basirizadeh (2018) in article entitled “The

Concept of Time in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield “discusses Bergson’s theory the world of the spirit, cannot be explained by the laws of science. The movement that occurs in this world is in one direction only, quality cannot be reduced to quantity and states of consciousness cannot be separated, identified, named or counted. Life processes, according to Bergson, can only be known through the metaphysical method of intuition. The *élan vital*, a vital life force, causes a non-deterministic, spontaneous movement that cannot be predicted or measured in physical time. By Matter, Bergson means inert matter, that which is studied by the natural sciences. It is essentially static and if there is movement, the movement is continuous, reversible and predictable and the principles of mechanism and determinism prevail in the world of Matter. Every movement is predetermined, has its necessary cause and consequence; there is no freedom. In order to obtain understanding of this type of reality we measure things and discuss them in terms of logic. (19) Traditional literary elements were becoming obsolete for Woolf, as she remained true to her vision of reality and increased her efforts to capture truth about time in her writing. For her, time was becoming an element of literature with its own characteristics. Woolf’s movement of psychological time, no doubt resulting from the influence of Bergson’s philosophy, would require sufficient space for ceaseless activity. Woolfian time is always seen as in motion but is interpreted differently by various literary commentators. According to Richter, Woolf’s insistence on *la duree* consists of “one moment of consciousness” vibrating with “myriad impressions” (39). Woolf focused on the flexibility of time that would allow us to “pause within the consciousness of one character only to move up and down in time within that consciousness” (207). Woolf also, however, leaps deftly from one character’s inner reality to another’s. Woolf’s writing flows so smoothly from one character’s mind to the next’s that one barely notices the transition. She needs to “record innumerable impressions” (Maurois 363) for her readers and to do this she will need to stretch and compress time into countless shapes. The essentially bleak writing of Virginia Woolf is, accurately described by Hussey when he declares, “That sense that life is a battle against nothingness, that all actions and efforts are merely necessary but futile attempts to disguise life’s empty center, is strong in Woolf’s thinking” (127). Certainly Woolf’s writing is courageous but despairing. Her integrity will never allow her to embellish her view of the truth. Human entities within her novels may struggle to deceive themselves, and Woolf may show us their subterfuge, but they will never completely conquer their terror or be happy for very long.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Structure of time in “To the Lighthouse”

To the Lighthouse strays a little more in its form from the conventional structure. In the first of these, “The Window,” the chronological events of a single day, interspersed with interruptions of psychological time. This first day is set at the seaside, in the summer home of the Ramsey. Mrs. Ramsey is the central character, and like Clarissa she is the center of a microcosm of family life. Her youngest son James longs to make a boat trip to the lighthouse on the following day and his mother would like to accompany him, but they are told by Mr. Ramsey that they will not be able to go because of the weather. In Part II, “Time Passes,” an omniscient observer, so detached and impersonal as to seem inhuman, gives a very objective rendering of description and facts. In contrast with this dispassionate description is the gripping beauty of the passage, where “the autumn trees, ravaged at they are, take on the flash of tattered flags kindling in the gloom of cool cathedral caves...” (192) and “spring...bare and bright like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity, was laid out on fields wide-eyed and watchful...” (198). Part III, “The Lighthouse,” is again told primarily in chronological time and encompasses the events of a single day, one that takes place ten years after the first day. Psychological time diverts chronological, as Mr. Ramsey fulfills his wife’s and son’s wish of years ago to go to the

lighthouse. His daughter Cam, James, and Mr. Ramsey himself make the voyage together, but the trip is nothing like what had been planned originally. Mrs. Ramsey is dead. James must be forced to go. Nothing is as it was meant to be.

Time moves through both the seasons of years and the seasons of lifetimes, and there are distinctions made between segments of time as well as between types of time. Between the first and last day lies the lyrical poem “Time Passes” that exists outside of the narrative flow, Woolf describes the state of existence within the Ramsey’s abandoned, rotting summer house. The effects of time are beautifully recorded as personified “airs” search the house for human life. Facts coldly inserted in brackets declare the deaths of family members. We learn that Mrs. Ramsey is dead. “Time Passes.” Prue, the most beautiful of Mrs. Ramsey’s children, looked lovely at her wedding, but she too is dead. Andrew has been killed in the war. In this section, then, time streams through the rites of passage that mark human growth, through the seasons of measurement between birth and death—in an “imponderable flow of external time . . .” (Kumar 64).

Time streams through seasons of hope and promise: for example, within a single year, it moves through spring; within a single lifetime, it moves through marriage. Not only does Woolf show us, so obviously, the movement of time in “Time Passes” (the second section), but also she shows us the sweep of time from the “The Window” (the first section), where the Ramsey’s progeny are in childhood and the adults seem to be in middle age, to its movement in “The Lighthouse,” where the children are in adolescence and Mr. Ramsey seems old.

In *To the Lighthouse* there is a mood of hopelessness, resulting, as described by Johnson, from “the implication of cosmic disinterest in human affairs” that “darkens the novel” (71). In “The Window” Woolf uses an animal skull to foreshadow death, just as she did once before in *Jacob’s Room*, where the doomed Jacob in his childhood slept with the “sheep’s jaw with the big yellow teeth” (14) at his feet. In *To the Lighthouse*, a pig’s skull is nailed to the wall and casts terrifying shadows for Cam, who is too watchful to relax. Mrs. Ramsey removes her shawl and wraps the skull in it, placating Cam—and metaphorically transforming death. Her shawl will remain in place for years after her death until, in “Time Passes,” the unraveling of time within the empty house, the slight shifting of the house with decay, cause the shawl to begin to unfold and hang against the wall: ““Idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro” (207). Does the fact that vivid memories of Mrs. Ramsey live in the minds of those who knew her negate the ravage of time? The hanging, purposeless shawl, unseen, falling apart seems to mock memory. From under its folds, the skull emerges, untouched by time. Death, Woolf seems to imply, is always the victor.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay sees his wife and son, as though from a great distance, in the window. Like all the characters in this novel, they appear “divinely innocent” and “defenseless against a doom” (53). (The next section of the novel, “Time Passes,” will reveal that there is reason to be suspicious of the future. Though James will be alive, Mrs. Ramsay will have arbitrarily been selected for death.) Yet while she lives, Mrs. Ramsay fights to keep her life continuous; she wants all that can be had of “the little strip of time presented itself to her eyes, her fifty years.” She sees life as being “terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance,” and she intends to be vigilant (91-92). In her watchfulness, Mrs. Ramsay relies on morality to protect those she loves and she conscientiously fulfills her role as wife and mother and nurturing friend. She understands her husband’s self-absorbed moods and is eager to serve as his complement; she protects her children from grief and fear; and she extends herself to make others happy, as, for example, she does when she inquires whether surly Mr. Carmichael,

one of her borders, would like her to bring back to him from town “Stamps, writing-paper, [or] tobacco?” (19). Mrs. Ramsay her efforts (61), but she is like “a sailor not without weariness [who] sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea” (127). She may be physically and emotionally depleted, but she will not quit life voluntarily. Life is pledged to others, and she is exhausted.

Raoufzadeh and etal (2020)in article entitled “The Study of Interior Monologue in Virginia Woolf’s Two Selected Novels, Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse “discussed To the Lighthouse Virginia Woolf succeeds in producing a much subtle effect through the use of this technique. This novel contains a great deal of straight, conventional narration and description, but the interior monologue is used often enough to give the novel its special character of seeming to be always within the consciousness of the chief characters.(765)

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay, maintains an illusion of permanence by bringing people together, for an evening at the dinner table or an afternoon at the beach, thus shaping memories that may endure in the minds of others. By the magnetism of her personality, “the magic of her being” (Oates 29), an evening spent at the dinner table or a casual moment on the beach can become a lasting impression. For Daiches, the significance of Mrs. Ramsay’s abilities is that she becomes “an important part of the texture of the consciousness” (188). For Simon, whose concern is with the flux of life, Mrs. Ramsay’s importance lies in her ability to impose order (193). In the third section of *To the Lighthouse*, after Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Lily Briscoe the artist who has been struggling with disproportion in the same painting since the beginning of the novel, suffers from “the pain of the want” when she remembers Mrs. Ramsay. After crying out in anguish, “Mrs. Ramsay!” she is consoled by a vision of her friend “stepping with her usual quickness across the fields (269-70). A bit later, Lily solves the problem of balance in her painting by adding the final, perfect brush stroke (Woolf 310). Therefore, both Daiches and Simon, with their different slants, are confirmed in the evaluations of Mrs. Ramsay’s strengths. Illusions of permanence, provided by social ceremonies, governing powers, and recollections, imply immortality and save us temporarily from the paralysis that might freeze all movement before death’s unblinking stare. Though Clarissa’s intention in giving a party is to provide an episode of beauty for her guests and herself, and Mrs. Ramsay’s intention at dinner is merely to function in an expected manner as wife, mother, and hostess, both characters contribute to the formation of illusions of permanence. Life has a semblance to meaningful activities at these times. Nevertheless, Woolf’s characters are not only sustained by their own defenses against death and their illusions of permanence. Eventually, all that is fashioned by social relations disintegrates, and Woolf’s characters must reach beyond themselves to something fixed and steady that seems to transcend time.

3.2 Time as an Element

The reason for studying Virginia Woolf, beyond the excitement of experiencing the beauty of her writing, is not to merely compile facts and therefore opinions on her writing. It is not to appear literary or knowledgeable. Rather, the true reason for a study of her works is to understand and appreciate her art. Everything discussed thus far leads to understanding Woolf’s beliefs about human beings and the world they inhabit. Although the movement of time may seem to be overlooked in this chapter, the concept of time as an element in Woolf’s writing is bound to this discussion of structure and ontology. For the conscious mind, the essence of Woolf’s methods of characterization exists in *la durée*. The duration of time, as it is experienced by human consciousness from moment to moment. Since Woolf’s purpose in writing was to reflect this reality, and since, as she saw it, human lives are so ephemeral, it seems reasonable that

she would stress the importance of time while de-valuing the meaningfulness of personality. Before continuing to read this discussion, we should recognize that an awareness of Woolf's treatment of literary elements within the novel and her slant on the meaning of life cannot be separated from a general understanding of her concept of time.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is also a fully-dimensional character in the first section of "The Window," but not in the middle and final sections. In the lyrical "Time Passes," Mrs. Ramsay and the fact of her death is an afterthought, a parenthetical, bracketed aside (194), and by the third part, "The Lighthouse," she is only a memory in Lily's mind. In *To the Lighthouse*, during dinner, Mrs. Ramsay ladles soup, gives directions to the maid, and people hold conversations. Woolf's characters have now become voices of consciousness whose thoughts are all we know of them. Without pause, and with only paragraphing and the mention of characters' names to alert the reader to the changes in voices. Woolf uses Bergson's concept of *duree*, an "uninterrupted thrust of change— of a change always adhering to itself in a duration which extends indefinitely" (Bergson 16) to present time as an element of fiction. The continuous flow of thinking, taking place in psychological time, has become more important to the narrative than traditional use of plot and characterization.

IV. Conclusion

In sum up, Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* wrote novels that dealt with the movement of time and the theme of death. For Woolf, this meant writing about activity within the conscious mind instead of composing traditional novels about action and characterization, where fictional people, as agents of action in the social, political, or economic realms of experience struggle to solve conflicts. Woolf offered no opiates, nothing to deaden the shock of annihilation that she believed was the inevitable ending of human life. Virginia Woolf's novels, including *To the Lighthouse*, present her attitude about the fluid qualities of time and memory. She has always been in search of equilibrium between the past and the nuances of present-tense perception. Woolf was well-aware of the material boundaries of time, and yet she also believed in a permanent source of experience that knew no chronological boundaries.

According to Kumar, time was "one of the most significant aspects" of her work; since she was impacted by the influence of Bergson's *durée*. "it should be possible to trace her development as a novelist in terms of her gradual swing from a traditional view of time . . ." (Kumar 63). Though *To the Lighthouse* begins to shows time used as an element with properties and characteristics of its own. Time is a living thing (Kumar 64) in this novel, when, in "Time Passes, it moves through the deserted Ramsay house as "clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, iterating, and reiterating their questions—"Will you fade? Will you perish? Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (276). For Woolf, the conscious mind might search for answers to the fundamental question "What is the meaning of life?" but it would find no answers because none exist. Yet in spite of her dark vision, Virginia Woolf would persevere as did the artist Lily in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily glances to the steps of the Ramsay home, where she wishes she would see the form of Mrs. Ramsay, and the steps are empty. Then she regards her canvas and it looks indefinite. Suddenly she intuitively knows what stroke is needed for completion and her painting is finished (310).

We respect Lily's representation of life even though we cannot experience her actual vision. In writing about this astonishingly gifted writer, Katherine Anne Porter wrote, "Virginia Woolf was a great artist, one of the glories of our time . . ." Woolf, as Porter joyfully declared, "Lived in the naturalness of her vocation. The world of the arts was her native territory; she

ranged freely under her own sky, speaking her mother tongue fearlessly. She was at home in that place as much as anyone ever was” (71). Virginia Woolf was a master writer who gave the world enduring loveliness. This paper of Woolf’s novel offers a magnified view of the author’s treatment of human experience within the realm of the conscious mind. More specifically, it dwells on Woolf’s preoccupation with the contrast between life’s exquisite moments and the heart-sinking conviction that all awareness is suddenly terminated by physical death. Primarily it is meant to illuminate Woolf’s attitude within her narratives toward living and dying. Though a great deal of scholarship has been done on Virginia Woolf, no significant analysis has been written on her use of time as an element with an emphasis on time’s awful movement toward death. Instead, critical writing has focused on either her perception of the nature of time or of reality, but not combined the two.

Furthermore, Woolf’s moods of sadness and fear, as her characters contemplate the abyss, is always referred to in the context of a larger investigation, such as Richter’s exploration of Woolf’s “complex of emotional reality” (41) or Hussey’s exploration of the “implicitly philosophical” issues raised by her novel. It can be of use to that person who intends to write about twentieth-century literature with the focus on such concerns as literary styles, states of reality, or even on philosophical issues. For example, studies related to narrative techniques, stream-of-consciousness, or the nature of self might benefit from familiarity with this thesis. This paper could also be helpful to the scholar who wishes to write about the influence of particular events, such as the two World Wars, or of the theories of Bergson.

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