



VIRGINIA WOOLF AND STREAM – OF - CONSCIOUSNESS NOVEL: A BRIEF NOTE

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An Abstract

This paper is an attempt to show how Virginia Woolf like many other artists wanted to paint a picture of life as she saw it getting obsessively preoccupied with the life of the mind and how she, belonging to the school of 'Stream of Consciousness' novelists, proved herself to be one such notable English novelist of the 20th century having the courage to break free from tradition so as to give them a new direction, a new form and a new spiritual awareness to the English novel by realizing the inadequacy of the traditional novel and adopting the stream of consciousness technique in her fictional world and also to bring home the point that in Woolf's novels, indirect interior monologue is combined with direct interior monologue.

Mrs. Virginia Woolf is one of those great writers of fiction who have thought long and deep about the mysteries of their own art and have their own theories about the form and substance of a good novel. Being a great creative artist, her works introduce one to a unique and living imaginative world. Like all other artists, she also wanted to paint a picture of real life as she saw it and she had her own vision of life, out and out keen on conveying it through her novels. The greatest aspect of Virginia Woolf's attitude towards the novel is her characteristic concept of what is reality. For her, reality is not simply the external features of society, with all its class-distinctions and conflicts or the material part of Nature but reality is what is embedded with the consciousness. She was convinced that the only reality worth presenting through the novel consists of 'acts of consciousness of several minds and these collectively express what is reality. As David Daiches rightly comments, "Virginia Woolf has been hailed as a prospector into new territory of the Novel" (P79), She was not therefore concerned with the continuation of the traditional view of reality consisting in ladies and gentlemen devoting themselves to problems of status or wealth, or sensual joys and so on. She became obsessively preoccupied with the life of the mind, from moment to moment, because she was convinced that "the mind is certainly a mysterious organ" with a great power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being" (A Room of One's Own 147). Her writings, the novels in particular, were all the products of such 'nuptials' of the mind with the intense experience of reality, undisturbed by motives and conventions. In one of the delightful essays namely "Professions for women", Mrs. Woolf has expressed this very idea that the novelist should keep his personal prejudices and commitments outside the scope of his art. She enunciates a doctrine for the novelist that T.S. Eliot enunciated for the poet, the dramatist and critic, the doctrine of "depersonalization":

"..... to understand it you must try first to imagine a novelist's state of mind. I hope I am not giving away professional secrets if I say that a novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible. He has to induce in himself a state of perpetual lethargy. He wants life to proceed with the utmost quiet and regularity" (Death of the Moth 152).

Belonging to the School of "Stream of Consciousness" novelists, she has proved herself to be one such notable English novelist of the 20th century having the courage to break free from tradition and then to give a new direction, a new form and new spiritual awareness to the English novel. She began writing her first two novels, **The Voyage out** and **Night and Day** in the established tradition of the novel But soon she realized the inadequacy of the traditional novel and adopted the stream of consciousness technique in the **Jacob's Room**, her third novel. Her art rapidly matured and her next novels namely **Mrs. Dalloway** and **To the Lighthouse** represent the very consummation of the novel of subjectivity. In the words of S.P. Appasamy, "Virginia Woolf was the finest product of the culture of England and Europe, of their literary and artistic sophistication, and of their intellectual strength and poetic sensibility..... she herself lived a full and busy life, social, intellectual and creative, and the richness of this experience is found in her creative work" (P10)

The term 'stream-of-consciousness' itself signifies the technique by its name and now the confusion arises whether the name 'stream of consciousness' denotes the technique or the genre. Earlier writers used it as a technique, now the term is used to refer to the genre itself. The technique used in the genre, 'stream-of-consciousness' was first used by William James in his **Principles of Psychology** (1890) to describe the flux of the mind and its continuity. He pointed out the true characteristics of consciousness that it is not clear and logical and it is a continuousness that it is not clear and logical and it is a continuous flow of images, sensations and thoughts into one another, so that a river or a stream is its natural metaphor. "Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits..... It is nothing jointed, its flows.... Let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness or of subjective life" (Allen 345). It was May Sinclair who used and popularized this term in connection with fiction first of all while analyzing Dorothy Richardson's novel **Pointed Roofs** (1915).



On the eve of the First World War, three novelists felt that time had come to reestablish the English novel in a completely new design. They are Marcel Proust in France, the author of **Remembrance of Things Past** (1913), in England, Dorothy Richardson who wrote **Pilgrimage** and James Joyce who wrote **A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man** (1914). As Leon Edel puts it, "Thus, between 1913 and 1915 was born the modern psychological novel-what we have come to call, in English letters, the stream- of-consciousness novel or the novel of the silent, the internal monologue and in French letters, the modern analytic novel, which, if not written as 'flowing' thought, sought the very atmosphere of the mind" (P11). For the first time, these three writers have turned away fiction from external to internal reality. They did endeavour to explore the inner life of the characters and project it before the world. Among these three novelists, Dorothy Richardson was the first exponent of the Stream-of-Consciousness technique who got interested in presenting the mental perceptions of her characters. James Joyce took to novel writing after Dorothy Richardson and he strove to picture every thought and emotion of his characters in a communicable way to the audience.

Following Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce, Mrs. Virginia Woolf sublimated this art and made a perfect use of it in her novels. From her earlier years, she was used to study the English and the French classics and so she introduced an elegant style and poetic sensibility in her fiction. She was interested in reading Bergson's philosophical works and the writings of her two contemporary innovators of fiction, Marcel Proust and James Joyce. By reading Joyce's *Ulysses*, she was very much affected by his new way of fiction writing and she was impressed by his prose style with its fluidity and suggestiveness.

Virginia Woolf is one such modern fiction writer who can be ranked with James Joyce with regard to the technical strength which is a means to the triumph of fiction. Woolf in her essay on 'Modern Fiction' observes: "the proper stuff of fiction does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit..." (P 9). This belief made her reject the traditional form of fiction in her later novels and create a new method by which she can communicate the myriad impressions and feelings of her imaginary characters. Another cause for her discarding of the existing conventions was that she wants to record life as it is felt by those who live it. It is for this reason she eliminated narration and comment. It is obvious in **Jacob's Room**, one of her earlier novels that the author comes forward not only for description and the recording of events but she is still presented as commentator like her forerunners. She narrates Jacob's words, thoughts and acts in a communicable way highlighting her craftsmanship. She was benefited by the intellectual atmosphere of Bloomsbury which enabled her to form her ideas on what she should do with the novel, what aspects of life or reality she was to represent. Bloomsbury enabled her to have the necessary preparation regarding style and selection of themes, and the satisfactory approach to adopt in her writings.

In Virginia Woolf's novels, indirect interior monologue is combined with direct interior monologue. This combination appears to be natural and suitable. Woolf's use of this technique throughout her two novels **Mrs.Dalloway** and **To The Lighthouse** produces a subtle effect. One can find in these novels ample use of conventional narration and description, but the interior monologue is used often to give those novels a touch of stream-of-consciousness. A close examination of the opening lines of **Mrs.Dalloway** throws a flood of light on the characteristics of her method:

"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the
Flowers herself.... He would be back
From India one of these days...." (P5)

Here in this passage, there is an element of incoherence and disunity which are the characteristics of stream-of-consciousness novels. A brief examination of the above passage reveals how Virginia Woolf used indirect interior monologue combined with direct interior monologue. "Mrs.Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself". In this opening sentence of the novel, the novelist hears her heroine's words and repeats them to the readers. So, this can be said to be the indirect interior monologue of Mrs.Dalloway; then suddenly, she identifies herself with the heroine and she directly transcribes the content of her character's consciousness: "For Lucy had her work out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges: Rumpelmayer's men were coming". Here from this passage, what is clearly revealed here is that the readers are directly introduced to Mrs.Dalloway's Psyche without the interference of the author. So, this can be said to be the indirect interior monologue of Mrs.Dalloway.

Virginia Woolf understood experience of reality, not as crude shock impressions sanctioned by society, but as Henry James brilliantly put it in his essay on 'The Art of Fiction', as "an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue...." She desired to construct her novel on the pattern of the spider-web, delicate yet capable of catching the smallest particle of experience of reality of life even the small particle like a snail crawling, or the quick flashes of emotion within the mind. As Herbert J.



Muller puts it, Virginia Woolf “made it her whole business to reproduce in purer form the actual sensation of living; to render immediately the essence of experience by subtle intimation and not by analysis or comment, by the vocation of atmosphere and not by formal narrative, by innumerable quick snapshots and not by set pictures of studio poses” (P 318)

From **Mrs. Dalloway to the Lighthouse**, there is no difference in the expression of inner life. The method of presentation remains the same. Woolf’s method of presenting her character’s mental process gets beautifully revealed here:

“But it may be fine-I expect it will be fine, said Mr. Ramsay making some little twist of the reddish-bron stocking she was knitting, impatiently” (P13).

The author clearly reveals what is going on in the mind of Mrs. Ramsay. This passage is also followed by another passage of the indirect interior monologue of Mrs. Ramsay. So, the controlling intelligence of the author is always felt in **To the Lighthouse**. The pattern of this novel is one of brief statements in direct speech followed by longer descriptions of the character’s reactions and thoughts in indirect speech Virginia Woolf by making the central intelligence of the author constantly controlling the material has tried to give form and coherence to her material.

Jean Guiguet in his book **Virginia Woolf and Her works** analyses the nature of stream-of-consciousness used in **To the Lighthouse**. She says, “Constantly, the exploration of the stream-of-consciousness alternates between surface and depth, between what is immediate, present and perceptible to the senses and what is remote, past or obscure” (P 375). To this, an illustration from the text is given. As Mrs. Ramsay on the terrace reading a story of ‘The Fisherman and his wife’, that story leads Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts to the conflict of wills in marriage. Then she thinks of Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley, of Doyle parents and her relations with them. Then seeing James, her son, who is present beside her, she begins to think of her children’s happiness and her own happiness. There inter feres the unknown news of a fifty-pound bill to be paid by her for the green house. As night falls, the story comes to an end and she is reminded of the children and young people who are out on an expedition. Though Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts have wandered so far, the readers have not left the window from which the beam from the lighthouse can be seen.

‘Soliloquy’ is one of the methods used in the stream-of-consciousness novels for representing the consciousness of the character directly from character to reader without the intervention of the author but with an assumed audience. Virginia Woolf’s **The Waves** (1931) is a novel in which ‘Soliloquy’ is used rather effectively and successfully. The novel **The Waves** is more like a poetic drama than a novel. The background of the story is known to us from the soliloquies of the six characters. She introduces six characters, Bernard, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, Jinny and Susan. Each character’s inner life is revealed to us from the nursery to middle or old age. The soliloquy here is a combination of the working of the conscious and the unconscious areas of the mind and it is suggestive and poetic. Each of the six characters comes to the forefront to give out his thoughts in a soliloquy and then moves off to be replaced by others.

Thus, it was Virginia Woolf who with her incomparable mastery succeeded in capturing the atmosphere of the mind. Her contribution to the stream-of-consciousness novel has been of immense significance. Though she may not be the originator of the stream-of-Consciousness novel, it is in her novels that the stream-of-Consciousness technique finds its best exemplification and balance. She has succeeded in her attempt to impose form and order on the chaos prevalent in the stream-of-Consciousness novel. It is only Virginia Woolf who made the genre, stream-of-Consciousness novel an acceptable and coherent art form. It was she who infused a kind of new life into the stream-of-consciousness novel.

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