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Exploring Cosmic Time in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*

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Abstract:

There are certain concepts which exist within the flow of reality; therefore, they cannot be conceptualized. This clearly happens when trying to analyze and define the concept of time or temporality in a literary work. It raises the question of whether it is possible to find a definition for the literary concept of time. To define the life and movement of reality is quite impossible as time and temporality represent this indefinable movement. In spite of the change in the treatment of time in the modern novel, we must recognize the fact that time as a phenomenon is composed by a series of different types of temporalities. The “concept” of time encompasses the temporality of the narration, the temporality of the narrated as well as the different types of temporalities lived by each character. This paper focuses on time and transcendence within the narrative scope given in *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf.

Keywords: Cosmic Time, Transcendence, Space, Reality, Temporality, Concept, Life.

Objective:

The objective of this paper is to explore Virginia Woolf's 'Cosmic Time' in *To the Lighthouse*. Though she strongly believed in the philosophy of Henri Bergson and her major writings greatly center round on it, yet the eternal concept of time is somewhere at the back of her mind which she has not been able to reject it out rightly. It's true that she has projected the fluid movement of time in the portrayal of the inner and outer world. Critics also agree that Woolf has subverted the basic concept of time and has used it as a play in most of her writings.

Introduction

Time is an important element in modern literature. Modernist Writing is noted for experimentation, complexity and formalism. The attempt to create a 'tradition of the new' is imbued in the works of modernist writings. The most important issue in modern literature is to portray human consciousness. Modernist writers have drawn in their own ways other types of temporalities apart from chronology. For the modern novelist life is no more "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged..." as said by Virginia Woolf in her essay *The Modern Fiction* (1925). In other words, the realities of human experience no longer arrange themselves as a sequence of events recorded in calendar time but as an intermingling of all events that shape our lives. Consciousness is man's measurement for the nature and duration of time.

The modern writers have followed the course of science to understand the element of time. It was Henri Bergson who first pointed the necessity to move away from the calendar sense in fiction, with his theory of the fluid nature of reality. He has emphasized upon intuition rather than upon reason as a means of sensing its duration. Clock time, according to Bergson has no real relation to human experience in which the time of the individual, the inner time of the mind, which flows, coalesces past into present and present into future, in which a minute may become an hour or an hour a second. Modern writers, in this light, have claimed that reality is never the static process of creation. Every present moment encloses the past and anticipates the future. The memory charts the course of personality in the continuous stream of time.

Time has always been one of the most important themes of Virginia Woolf's novels. The purpose of this paper is to look at Woolf's treatment of the movement of time within the conscious mind of the novel *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. She insisted on experiencing one moment of consciousness as myriad impressions. She was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson and that consequently and 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.

Woolf and Cosmic Time

Virginia Woolf's perception of time was very special and modernist. Woolf wanted to break down the traditional perception of time and play with it more freely, and she was really successful. 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 an element of literature with its own characteristics. Woolf dismissed the popular notion of time as all pervasive and governing force. On the contrary, she opined that time exists within individuals and the characters are capable of slowing down time. Woolf was acutely and intimately conscious of this strange elasticity of time; something she contemplated not only in her novels, for the public eyes, but also in the privacy of her diary, which she considered creatively essential. She used some specific ways of passing time in many of her fiction and she often recorded her thoughts about time in her diary. She wrote on the 23rd November 1926 what she was thinking of Mrs. Dalloway:

“... and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident - say the fall of a flower - might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist - nor time either.”(Diary 104)

Woolf often did not express time directly and clearly. She preferred to use hints or other ways to show the passing of time. In her novels, we do not often find some clock or straightforward expression of time or specific note of how much time has passed. Woolf usually used nature for showing the time - the cycle of a flower, watching the snail, passing day...

“Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever; will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world - this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, and diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change, one flying after another, so quick, yet we are somehow successive and continuous, we human beings, and show the light through. But what is the light? I am impressed by the transitoriness of human life to such an extent that I am often saying a farewell after

dining with Roger, for instance; or reckoning how many more times I shall see Nessa." (Diary 137)

Even though Virginia Woolf was still quite young when she wrote this in her diary (it was in January 1929 when she was not even 50), we can understand it. She had tried to commit suicide several times, and she could not predict when, or whether, her illness would come back. She would then be in such a state of mind that it would be more reasonable for her to die. But she did not necessarily have to write about death. Sometimes, everyone thinks about his or her own life and how fast it flies, how fast it changes under our hands and in front of our eyes. We are not able to perceive and catch all things which have changed and what has happened. We never know what will happen in the next moment. We can never say for sure if we will see these people again, and especially, when one is older, it is reasonable to consider that it might be the last time.

Beginning with *To the Lighthouse*, her most beautiful work, each of her novel is an original creation, not only plot and character but in method and form. *To the Lighthouse* is fashioned like an hourglass. It explores time at every scale, tracking the intricate thoughts and impressions within a single lived second while also meditating on the infinity of geologic time stretching back into the past and forward into the future beyond the span of human knowledge. Between these two extremes, the novel presents the different measures of time out of which individual experience is composed. The passage of time tears through the center of the narrative like a great fissure and suddenly and irrevocably arresting all actions, rendering all words mute and inconsequential. Exposed is the frailty of human life and its smallness. In the first part, The Window, the human personalities are in motion like luminous grains of sand, each existing separately but all marvelously controlled by invisible elastic net. In part two, Time Passes, the house stands empty, until the almost inarticulate women come, and events run like falling grains in neck. Then time broadens out with the return of consciousness to the empty dwelling. Two streams are blended through the memories of Mrs. Ramsay; that of the woman trying to recover her vision of the painting as she watches the moving boat, and the occupants of the boat, especially Mr. Ramsay. Then comes to rest, as the boat reaches the lighthouse and Lily Biscoe puts on her picture the dab of paint that completes her vision.

Part 1, The Window, and Part 2, Time Passes and Part 3, The Lighthouse occur almost in “real time,” as the action described takes place within a period more or less equivalent to the period of time it takes to read the section. Within these sections, each character’s perspective picks up on an immense range of detail and the observant Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are especially conscious of the unique specificity of each moment. The novel also explores the vacation time of the Ramsays and their guests, for whom the scenes of the novel are lived within a “break” from their normal lives in London, and the circular, ritual time of communal activity and habit, as the characters repeat the daily routines of walks and dinners, react to one another in predictable ways, and repeatedly profess long-held opinions. Zooming out from daily life, *To the Lighthouse* reflects on time’s larger frameworks as Mrs. Ramsay considers the irretrievable time of childhood and she, along with Mr. Ramsay and Lily confront human tininess in the course of the Earth’s existence. Yet Mrs. Ramsay and Lily (and, though he has his doubts, Mr. Ramsay) believe that it is possible to make “something permanent” out of the moment, and thus Lily paints to partake of eternity as Mrs. Ramsay orchestrates lived experience until it becomes as transcendent as art. In Part 2, Time Passes, the “real time” of The Window accelerates to breakneck speed and the section spans a whole decade in just a few pages. Without much attention to detail, this view on time lacks the particularity and complexity of time in The Window and is characterized only by a barebones framework of events. Thus, the enormity of Mrs. Ramsay’s, Prue’s, and Andrew’s deaths, and of World War I, are reduced to one sentence parentheticals.

As committed as it is to capturing an experience of lived time, *To the Lighthouse* is just as interested in the relics that linger after experience, and the novel holds up many different forms of memory. There is the history book memory of impartially and sparsely recounted event as demonstrated in the bullet-like plot points of Part 2, Time Passes. There is the circular memory Mrs. Ramsay has thinking back on her youth, recognizing in her children’s youth their own future memories, and feeling life to be a cycle of marriage and childbearing passed on from generation to generation. There is the living memory of Mrs. McNab and Lily as their recollected images of Mrs. Ramsay appear visible on the surface of the present world.

To the Lighthouse ultimately demonstrates the inadequacy of clock time to measure human experience: life is not felt, Woolf shows, second by orderly second. Instead, one minute seems to drag on an eternity while the next two decades speed by. One is one second aware of a

human lifespan as a long, luxurious stretch and the next second perceives it to be an infinitesimal fraction of Earth's much more enduring existence. Memories return in the present and live on, sometimes seeming never to have passed.

In the twentieth century, thanks to new scientific, philosophical and psychological theories, the view modern literature had of the passing of time considerably changed. Virginia Woolf, being born in this literary environment, was impressed by the need writers had to create a new approach to the idea of time in their novels. She soon started to elaborate her own personal sense of time, which is extremely distant from the traditional chronological sequence. This paper presents the urge Virginia Woolf had to break with the previous literary tradition, based on a chronological pattern and to introduce a new example of personal and subjective time in her novels. Woolf suggests that time is a personal process of the individual's mind. According to her view, time exists only within the individual's mind and constantly flows in uninterrupted successions. Her novels demonstrate Virginia Woolf's desire to use new forms to convey the function of the human mind on the page and she often uses new experimental patterns, like the stream of consciousness technique. One can analyze, in short, the content and the structural development of three of her major time-oriented novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*. These three novels when examined carefully explicate the use Woolf made of time. In particular, the use of time by Woolf can be observed in the aspects of time of the mind in *Orlando*, the structure of a single-day novel in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the complexity of the tripartite structure of *To the Lighthouse*. These three novels cover the problem of the uninterrupted succession of past, present and future and the simultaneous existence of the three times. In these novels past, present and future coincide while a character is remembering something. Woolf has also posited the problem of the negative nature of the clock in her novels. In fact, the clock appears to be often considered an antagonist. For example, the appearance of Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway* that relates as a reminder of reality and the consequences faced by different characters. On the other hand, the clock also links the characters together, creating simultaneous activities happening at the same time.

“The extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.” This is properly the reason why all of Virginia Woolf's novels, to some extent, experiment upon the concept of time. In *To the Lighthouse*, it is generally charged that the author dismisses the popular notion of time being the

governing force, controlling individuals' action and not decelerating for anybody. But this is not true. Through Mr. Ramsay she says:

And his fame lasts how long? It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter. His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years? (asked Mr. Ramsay ironically, staring at the hedge) (Woolf 26)

This is indeed the tone of the author. She has got the cosmic clock in her mind. This notion of time is contrary to the modernist tradition. To her, a man is a mere speck and the period of two thousand years is most minimal and insignificant before the vast stretch of eternity. Her basic notion of time continues to be reflected when Mr Ramsay says:

What, indeed, if you look from a mountain-top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare. His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still. (26)

The above passage clearly shows Woolf's fundamental concept of time. But she has the art of contracting and expanding time in different situations with different characters. Time Passes validates Lily's and the Ramsays' fear that time will bring about their demise, as well as the widespread fear among the characters that time will erase the legacy of their work. It proves Woolf's basic concept of time that she adheres to.

Conclusion

To the Lighthouse is restricted to a duration of ten years. The novel is composed of three parts, each of which envisions time distinctly. Woolf conceives of time in the first chapter *The Window* as a matter of psychology rather than chronology. She establishes what Henri Bergson, termed *durée*, a theory suggesting that the world is internal and intuitive rather than external and material. Although forming two-thirds of the novel, this section only concerns minute details of a September afternoon and evening, but within this, simultaneously illustrates a wide variety of times, enabling us to follow the chain of thoughts of key figures in the novel.

To the Lighthouse explores time at every scale, tracking the intricate thoughts and impressions within a single lived second while also meditating on the infinity of geologic time stretching back into the past and forward into the future beyond the span of human knowledge.

Virginia Woolf's theory of time is somewhat difficult to sum up because it is composed of divergent points of view and focused on eternal concept of time. She found the conventional time sequence inadequate and was compelled to find within the flux of life something which would prevail. Her novels like *To the Lighthouse*, must be experienced rather than understood. They are the gleams and flashes of time becoming rather than the record of time that has been.

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