

# The Importance of Narrative Style in Virginia Woolf's the Mark on the Wall

Khajieva Feruza, Kendjaeva Gulrukh and Rakhimova Shakhnoza

Department of English Literary and Translation Studies, Foreign Languages Faculty, Bukhara State University, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** Virginia Woolf's short story *The Mark on the Wall* exemplifies modernist literature through its innovative narrative techniques, particularly the stream of consciousness. This study analyzes how Woolf's use of this technique creates a modernistic vision of reality, emphasizing subjective experience and inner reflection. The analysis involves a close reading of the text, identification of key themes such as war, gender dynamics, and technological advancements, and a comparison with William James's psychological theories. The study demonstrates how Woolf's narrative style mirrors the complexities of the human mind and the rapidly changing society of the early XX century, offering a unique portrayal of reality through the protagonist's contemplative journey.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's short story *The Mark on the Wall* captures the essence of modernist literature through its innovative narrative techniques. Woolf, a central figure in the modernist literary movement, is renowned for her experimental approach to storytelling, which often deeply explores the inner lives of her characters. Her style is characterized by a departure from linear narratives and an emphasis on the fluidity of consciousness. In *The Mark on the Wall*, Woolf employs the stream of consciousness technique, a hallmark of her writing, to explore the protagonist's contemplation of a mark on the wall. This narrative style allows readers to experience the character's thoughts and reflections on various aspects of life and society, such as war, nature, gender dynamics, and self-actualization. Modernism, the literary movement to which Woolf contributed significantly, sought to break away from traditional forms and conventions, emphasizing subjectivity, fragmented structures, and a focus on individual consciousness. Through this technique, Woolf enables a modernistic vision of reality, where subjective experience and inner reflections are brought to the forefront, making the narrative rich in thoughts, ideas, and self-reflection rather than actions.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the narrative techniques in Virginia Woolf's short story *The Mark on the Wall* and how these techniques contribute to a modernistic vision of reality. The primary source is the text of *The Mark on the Wall*. Secondary sources include works by William James, James Harker, Mine Özyurt Kılıç, F.M. Khajieva, and Marc D. Cyr. A close reading of the story examines Woolf's use of the stream of consciousness technique, identifying key passages that illustrate the flow and change of thoughts. Thematic analysis identifies major themes such as war, gender dynamics, and technological advancements, exploring how they are interwoven into the narrative. Comparative analysis with William James's descriptions of thought in *The Principles of Psychology* highlights how Woolf's techniques align with or differ from psychological theories. The research is grounded in modernist literary theory, focusing on subjective experience and narrative fragmentation. While the study offers insights into Woolf's narrative techniques, its findings are specific to this story and may not generalize to all of Woolf's works or modernist literature.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main character of the story is a woman, who sitting in the room suddenly notices the mark on the wall. The story is based on the thoughts and ideas that the woman has while observing the mark and trying to find its' origin: "I must jump up and see for myself what that mark on the wall really is- a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood?" (Woolf 8) Thinking about the mark, she also dives into different thoughts ranging from the war "Curse this war! God damn this war" (10), nature "Nature counsels, comforts you, instead of enraging you" (8-9), women and men "the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets standards" (6-7), self-actualization "I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself" (5), and each time the mark on the wall serves to navigate the infinite stream of ideas that the character has.

Such floating of thought was possible due to the narrative technique, known as the stream of consciousness, which refers to the depiction of the conscious and subconscious world of the character, by detailed delivery of the narrator's thoughts and impressions. William James, American philosopher and psychologist, who coined the term "stream of thought" and "stream of consciousness", in his book *The Principles of Psychology*, outlines five important characteristics of thought: "1) Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness. 2) Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing. 3) Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous. 4) It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself. 5) It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects, chooses from among them, in a word all the while" (James 225). These characteristics align with Woolf's stream of consciousness technique, emphasizing the continuous and changing nature of thought, as well as its selective focus on certain objects, mirroring the protagonist's contemplative journey in Woolf's story.

According to F.M. Khajieva, stream of consciousness is "a narrative style that mirrors the unstructured, free-flowing nature of human thought, presenting a character's immediate and often fragmented stream of thoughts and perceptions." (Khajieva 65) In the short story "The Mark on the Wall" such technique enabled the writer to cover almost every issue that the society of the period had within several pages. Therefore, the importance of narration cannot be neglected and needs to be analyzed.

First, it is important to note that the rise of interest in human nature and psyche was observed in the XX century. Fundamental works of Sigmund Freud in

psychoanalysis and unconsciousness provoked the urge for self-reflection. James Harker also mentions that in most of the Virginia Woolf's characters' "inner life is rich with sensation and thought, inspired by the lowest and most common of material artifacts" (2). In the story the main character is also trying to reflect the unconscious parts of her mind: "I want to sink deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts" (5). She is trying to explore every aspect of her unconsciousness, dive deep into own inner world, as she finds it intriguing: "I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle" (5). Such aspiration to think and reflect upon oneself in the literary analysis, considering the narrative technique, is called stream of consciousness. Harker exemplifies such narration by describing how "characters are constantly observing and thinking as they navigate the world, whether that means sitting alone in a room contemplating an ordinary object, taking a walk, going to a party or looking out the window" (2). Such techniques of narration became common during the XX century in the works of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

In "The Mark on the Wall", the character also depicts the way the thoughts and memories emerge. "How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of a straw so feverishly, and then leave it" (3). All the thoughts that the woman has are as quick flashes appear for a moment and suddenly perish, again focusing of the small mark on the wall, which in my opinion, hardly resembles the reality, but instead is the perfect representation of the changeable period where the story is set.

However, another interesting opinion about the snail, its' role in the story and narrative technique was given by Kılıç, who suggests that "the narrator focuses her creative energy on the snail, the very mark on the wall; and Woolf portrays the narrator's mind at work trying to identify the mark in tune with the pace of the snail" (21). In other words, Kılıç considers that the narrative style of the story imitates the pace of the snail enabling "the text invites its reader to a rhythm that would allow her to attend to these images with a similarly slow pace" (20). Such comparison of the narrative style and its speed can be significant since it can imply to the ways the thoughts are originated in one's mind. At the same time, it allows the reader to fully immerse into the main character's inner world in the authentic manner of contemplating. Kılıç considers, that "the medium and the message act in unison to convey the absorbed interest, the very source and the product of the text" (21), specifically the words and the structure of the

sentences follow the pace of the snail movement, so they can reflect the way the character is thinking.

In my opinion, such interpretation of the role of the snail in the story can be argued, since the speed of how fast and unpredictably the thoughts change in the story cannot be mimetic to the slow and sluggish moves of the snails. For example, after long contemplations on the "masculine point of view which governs our lives" (Woolf 6-7) its effects and consequences, the main character suddenly changes her focus to the mark again "in certain lights that mark on the wall seems actually to project from the wall" (7). Such rapid change of the thoughts from the general ideas about the issues the character is dealing with and the nature of the mark on the wall, which becomes a pattern in the narration, in my opinion, is not characteristic to the nature of snails, but it can represent the fast changes the society of that time was undergoing. For examples, the narrator thinks: "if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour" (4). The narrator is not able to catch up with the rapidness of life, and probably, therefore, the focus of her thoughts changes so fast.

On the importance of the narration in the story Cyr brought a new perspective. According to his point of view the narrative style of Virginia Woolf in general "models Christian eschatology, a concept condemned not with the end of the world per se, but rather with the perspective that knowledge of an end brings to present understanding" (16). He considers that the setting of the story during the World War I and the issues of death can be the sign of eschatological narration: "Foremost among these social condemnations and pertinent to eschatology is Woolf's treatment of death" (Cyr 17). Such interpretation can lead to the assumption that the importance of War and the death are integral in understanding the story and the message that the writer wants to deliver. Even though the text does not contain the direct references to the war and death till the very end of the story "Curse this war! God damn this war" (10), there are still some implications of the wartime. For example, while the narrator is recalling the past, she says: "only when we were torn asunder" (3), which may be a mention of the war.

In my opinion, the importance of the war is in the story cannot be neglected; however, there is kaleidoscope of other significant topics presented in "The Mark on the Wall". The story touches many different issues relevant to the historical period it belongs. One of them deals with different perspective towards the role of men and women. For instance, the narrator thinks about the Whitaker's Table of Precedency and "the masculine point of view, which sets the standards" "will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go" (7). Such thoughts help the

reader understands that the Victorian era and its ideas are passing, but modernistic vision of the world is already replacing the past.

The opposition between the nature and the rapid progress of science can also be considered as one of the topics that concern the narrator. The development of the technology and engineering in the example of the above mentioned "the Tube at fifty miles an hour-landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair!" (4), which the narrator describes to be "so haphazard" (4) is contrasted to "something definite, something real" (9), which turns to be the nature: "Wood is a pleasant thing to think about" (9). The unknown and new feelings brought by technology seem to tempest the narrator, which can also be applied to the rest of the society.

The fast pace of the changes may overwhelm a person, as it is hard to accept and adjust them. A person may start to be dubious about the future, not knowing what to expect next. The historical background of XX century also did not show any resolution to the problems people had. So the only thing, which was certain, was the present. People, being disappointed in the past and perplexed by future, could only rely on themselves in the present. For example, in "The Mark on the Wall", the narrator tries to focus and stops on thought of Shakespeare, drawing his image. "To steady myself, let me catch hold on the first idea that passes... Shakespeare..." (5).

But, she claims: "But how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn't interest me at all" (5). Then she continues her search for something more pleasant to think about: "I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasantest thoughts, and very frequent even in the minds of modest mouse-coloured people, who believe genuinely that they dislike to hear their own praises. They are not thoughts directly praising oneself; that is the beauty of them" (5). So, the narrator finds the delight in thinking about herself and reflecting her own personality, this can also point to the perception of reality by the character; to her the real world is in her own mind, she herself right at that moment is the only thing, which true and cannot be argued.

## 4 CONCLUSION

In general, "The Mark on the Wall" is a complex story about the modern world. The reality in this text is relative, the mark, which caught the narrator's attention, despite of its nature, in my opinion serves as a trigger for the thoughts and complex contemplations about life. The mark can also be

compared to the button, which turns the women into the reality, like the Big Ban was used in Woolf's novel "Miss Dalloway". However, the reality for the narrator is not represented by the mark on the wall; the real world can be elusive, the fact that the mark turned out to be a snail can emphasize this, but she finds the real world in her thoughts, the real world which sees through the prism of her own personal experience. The character of Woolf's story is hyperopic image of the modernistic society, their problems, concerns and thoughts. And the stream of consciousness used in the story allowed the writer to depict the reality in the very original way.

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