

A Picture of “Subjective Reality”: A Narrative Analysis of Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall”

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Unlike traditional fiction, Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” doesn’t have lively characters, detailed setting, or intriguing plot. Discarding the traditional narrative mode of zero focalization, the narrator adopts a new fixed internal focalization, interwoven with the first person external point of view. By weakening the physical time and space, the narrator tells the story according to her psychological time and space, stressing the moment of importance, through which the writer highlights her subjective reality.

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Introduction

In the early twentieth century, Europe endured the pain of World War I, due to which the traditional social structure was under the threat of falling apart. The social unrest triggered the advancement of Western literature. Some avant-garde writers broke through the tradition of fiction writing with bold innovations, focusing their works on the complicated inner world of individuals and trying to depict their ever-changing thought process. Thus, stream-of-consciousness, a new narrative mode took shape.

Among these innovative writers, Virginia Woolf was regarded as one of the greatest modernist literary figures of the twentieth century. “The Mark on the Wall”, a short story published in 1917 in London, was one of her earliest experiments with stream-of-consciousness. In the story, she discarded the traditional structure of stories which based on plot or time sequence. Instead, by following the narrator’s flow of consciousness, which is arbitrary and ever-changing, Woolf reflected her intricate while delicate feelings towards life and reality.

Challenge to Traditional Fiction Writing

“The Mark on the Wall” is considered the first sign of modern fiction. In the story, we find no trace of lively characters, detailed setting, or intriguing plot, which are the indispensable elements in traditional fiction. With an unconventional beginning, evolving around “my” continuing flow of consciousness, the story tells, in detail, “my” six unconstrained conjectures of the mark on the wall. After straying into several pages of reflections on society, history, reality, art, and life itself, it finally concludes that the mark is a snail.

In fiction, setting includes the time, location, and everything in which a story takes place. However, “The

"Mark on the Wall" has no geographical or time reference. Although in the opening sentence, the writer tells us that "Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall" (Woolf, 1921, p. 99), we still cannot infer the exact time when the narrator's six unconstrained conjectures of the mark happen because the first paragraph is a mixture of past and present. To be frank, "The Mark on the Wall" does have characters, "I" and "someone" who doesn't show up till the end and speaks only two sentences. Yet we know nothing about the main character "I", the sex, age, identity, occupation, appearance, experience, etc., nothing at all except her (let's suppose "I" and the writer are identical in gender) boundless and dizzy psychological activities. We know more about her inner world than the physical world.

Without proper setting and lively characters, it would definitely be hard for stories to present any intriguing plot. This is the case in point in "The Mark on the Wall". What can be counted as plot is the narrator's free association of the mark only, no conflict, no ups and downs. Being a pioneer of modern English fiction, Woolf (1925) believes that "if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style" (p. 150).

New Narrative Mode

In *Narrative Discourse*, by introducing the term "focalization", Genette (1980, pp.188-190) put forward a three-term typology concerning narrative situations. The first type is the *nonfocalized* narrative, or narrative with *zero focalization*, i.e. the narrative with omniscient narrator, or Narrator > Character (where the narrator knows more than the character does, or says more than any of the character knows). The second type is the narrative with *internal focalization*, i.e. Narrator = Character (the narrator says only what a given character knows). Three kinds of internal focalization are further distinguished, including fixed, variable, and multiple. The third type is the narrative with *external focalization*, i.e. Narrator < Character (the narrator says less than the character knows).

Traditional fiction writers normally adopt zero focalization, through which the omniscient narrator knows everything and can explain all the thoughts and actions of every character. Nevertheless, the stream-of-consciousness writers believe that the description of the external world is retold by the storyteller and therefore not real. They think reality only exists in the character's narration. Therefore, they apply internal focalization instead of zero focalization to their works.

"The Mark on the Wall" is a narrative with fixed internal focalization. The story begins in the middle of the consciousness of the narrator—"I". Following and focusing on her subjective consciousness, we plunge ourselves into her inner world. In traditional fiction, the writer usually looks at other people's action and narrates their stories through the first person narrator "I". But in this story, the writer disappears. Instead, readers know only the protagonist's thought process. All the things other than the narrator's consciousness are unknown.

Looking into the story, we may find there is also an interchange of point of view between the empirical "I" and the narrative "I", which can be identified through the mixed use of the past tense and the present tense. In the first paragraph, sentences in the past tense distinguish between the notice of the mark for the first time and the ongoing reflections on it by the first person narrator. Though most part of the narrative is in the present tense, telling us different conjectures of the narrative "I" towards the mark on the wall, yet in the seventh paragraph, there are lots of sentences in past tense, which are the retrospect of the first person narrator—the empirical "I".

This latter point of view could also be called the first person external point of view as explained by Shen Dan in her *Narratology and the Stylistics of Fiction* (1998, pp. 203, 223).

Application of Psychological Time and Space

"Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall" (Woolf, 1921, p. 99). In order to pinpoint the time she first saw the mark, the protagonist thinks of "the burning coals", "the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower", and "the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock." By realizing that it could be "made by a nail", she thinks of "the miniature of a lady", "the people who had this house before us" and "the back garden of the suburban villa". As the mark is "too big, too round", she thinks of "the mystery of life", the "inaccuracy of thought", the "ignorance of humanity", "things lost in one lifetime", "the rapidity of life", and "after life".

Feeling that the mark might be "some round black substance, such as a small rose leaf", she then thinks of "Troy", "Shakespeare", human beings' instinct of "self-protection", "Sunday in London", and "Whitaker's Table of Precedency". Seeing that the mark "seems actually to project from the wall", the writer thinks of "a small tumulus", "Retired Colonels", "the neighbouring clergy", "their elderly wives", and a "world without professors or specialists". By fixing her eyes upon it, she feels it is "a plank in the sea". Thus, she thinks of "wood" and the life of "a tree". And in the final part, someone "standing over me" reveals that "It was a snail."

From the above introduction of the whole story, we can see, instead of following the normal time sequence, the story develops in the free psychological space. Physically speaking, the time and space of the story remain unchanged from the beginning to the end. The whole story depicts only a moment of thoughts of the protagonist and she remains a sitting posture in the room while her consciousness travels through history without any restriction. In her thoughts, there are descriptions of concrete images, in-depth reflections on art, and the comprehension of the meaning of life, the spirit of the universe. The narrator is now stepping into the illusory future, now jumping back to the ancient Greek time, now staying on the present leading articles and cabinet ministers. History, present, and future constantly cross each other, implying a disorder of time.

Similarly, the protagonist's consciousness travels freely in different spaces. She is now standing outside the window of Shakespeare, now visiting the tumulus on the South Downs, now roaming on the meadow of London. Based on the flow of consciousness of the protagonist, the story evolves not in the traditional linear mode, but in "a flower-like radiating structure" (Qu, 1989, p. 63). With the mark on the wall as the centre, through free association, the story goes back and forth to the depth of the unreal consciousness, which forms a flower with six petals (six conjectures of the mark).

Subjective Reality VS. Objective Reality

The mark on the wall, which indicates the physical reality, is meaningless itself. What's important is the perceiver's consciousness. Woolf believed the reflections of the tree were much more important than the tree itself. She was particularly interested in the inner reality. What we saw was just the surface reality, it might be cheating. What we are thinking is genuine. This is the indisputable truth. In "The Mark on the Wall", Woolf (1921) directly pointed out that the task of novelists was to write about reflections on reality instead of reality itself:

As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted, as the Greeks did and Shakespeare perhaps—but these generalizations are very worthless. (Woolf, 1921, pp. 106-107)

In "Modern Fiction", Woolf (1925) expressed similar viewpoint:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. (Woolf, 1925, p. 150)

In "The Mark on the Wall", by following the protagonist's subjective consciousness, we enter into her inner reality. However, with her continuous self-negation of the unconstrained conjectures of the mark as the physical reality intrudes at times, we come back and forth between the objective reality and her subjective reality. Woolf created the concept of "moments of importance". In the moment of importance, physical time and space fuse with psychological time and space, the subjective reality crosses the objective reality. Also in "Modern Fiction", Woolf (1925) expressed her unique understanding towards life and reality:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being "like this". Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there. (Woolf, 1925, pp. 149-150)

The closing part of the story expresses the writer's criticism of the external reality. The dialogue, which reveals the identification of that mark as a snail, indicates the circumstantial reality. "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail" (Woolf, 1921, p. 116). This is the voice of the objective reality, which stops the narrator from going further with her searching for the meaning of life. Although fiction of stream-of-consciousness stresses the description of the inner world and seldom reflects social problems in the objective world, yet in "The Mark on the Wall", we can still read the writer's thoughts over life, her dissatisfaction with the reality, and her pursuit of freedom and ideal.

Conclusion

Being a pioneer and representative writer of the modernism, Virginia Woolf introduced innovations in her fiction. Written in 1917 when modernism was on its way, "The Mark on the Wall" is such a typical piece of writing of stream-of-consciousness. Unlike traditional fiction, the story doesn't have lively characters, detailed setting, or intriguing plot. Discarding the traditional narrative mode of zero focalization, the narrator adopts a new fixed internal focalization, interwoven with the first person external point of view. By weakening the physical time and space, the narrator tells the story according to her psychological time and space, stressing the moment of importance, through which the writer highlights her subjective reality. All in all, the whole piece of writing is more a picture than a story.

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