

Reality in Abstraction — A Tentative Analysis of Virginia Woolf

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Abstract: To the Light House is Virginia Woolf's one of the most famous "stream of consciousness novels". For over ten years Mrs. Woolf advocated the new style of writing assiduously in her works. There is not much of plot in most of her major work. Relatively speaking, she focused more on the reflection of the inner world and mind's responses of the characters in her works. One is its autographic style—Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are the epitome of Woolf's parents, which offers precious materials to study the comparison between sense and sensibility. She poured out all the memories stored in her mind over the years to express her emotions—recalling her parents in heaven. The other is its great value in both mental and artistic fields. Woolf abandoned the traditional writing mode, and masterly used skills and innovative thinking to reproduce the contradictory inner world perfectly, which marks the important development of "stream of consciousness novels" in modernist literature.

Keywords: The light house; The streams of consciousness; Idealism and realism

1. Introduction

To the Light House was published in 1927, an autobiography "stream of consciousness" novel, with a clue—sailing to the light house throughout the whole text, illustrating a life experience of the Ramsay family and several guests before and after the First World War.

The reason for my choosing the topic for my paper is that "stream of consciousness" plays an important role in modernist novels, while Woolf is one of the leading authors in this field. She witnessed the great change in Britain from the Victorian age to the new age. Because of suffering from depression, Woolf saw the world differently. As the similar experience both of our world overlaps, meanwhile I write novels to express my feelings as well.

Criticism of Virginia Woolf has been through many phases. Researchers often overlook the truth of Woolf's novels, because they couldn't understand the almost magical imagery she used. Therefore, I would like to be a bridge between Woolf and general readers, for helping you remove the mist and seek for the truth. Woolf hold the view that traditional novelists try to meet the tyrannical need for plot interest, creating probable, impeccable tragedies, comedies, and love stories with characters well dressed like real people, while life can be very different and can be represented radically differently. The human mind receives every day a "a myriad of impressions" which do not always provide the right stuff for any plot interest in a tragedy or comedy or a love story, nor lead to any logical traditional endings. And Woolf carried out her idea completely. The character in her novel actually derives from daily life. The so-called reality: So long as you could identify with the characters in novels, there would be a connection between the visual world and the reality. Where there is connection, there must be commonality, and if there is commonality, there must be veridicality.

2. Pursuit of Stream-of-consciousness

2.1 The Subjectivity of Narrative

Woolf used the writing technique of "internal monologue" and "perceptual impression" instead of the "omniscient perspective" which is often used in realism. It is the technique narrating from the subjective point of view of the characters and the author herself doesn't intervene between the book and readers, which means backing to the scenes with the detached attitude.

Not only avoiding hindering the heart-to-heart connection and resonance, but also making readers feel like they are actually there.

The “internal monologue” can be divided into two sections: the “direct inner monologue” and the “indirect inner monologue”. The “direct inner monologue” enables the characters to use the ways like meditations or soliloquies to express their thoughts and feelings in a particular situation, which often reflects a steady motivation of inner mind with no sound. When the author uses the “direct inner monologue”, he adopts the first person to narrate and explore the complex inner being of the characters in utterly truth, which makes reader understand the characters more comprehensively and deeply. Here is a paragraph in chapter one of the novel.

If she finished it tonight, if they did go to the lighthouse after all, it was to be given to the lighthouse keeper for his little boy, who was threatened with a tuberculous hip; together with a pile of old magazines, and some tobacco, indeed whatever she could find lying about not really wanted, but only littering the room, to give those poor fellows, who must be bored to death sitting all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp and trim the wick and rake about on their scrap of garden, something to amuse them. (Virginia Woolf, 1927:6)

Because of the “internal monologue” features, the characters in Woolf’s novels are not one-sided, but consist of many factors that appear to be in conflict with each other. As the paragraph above, depicting a soliloquy when Mrs. Ramsay is preparing the gifts to the lighthouse keeper’s kids, which restores the inner world of Mrs. Ramsay truthfully. In the eye of many people, Mrs. Ramsay is the embodiment of the “Virgin Mary”. There is kind of personal charisma around her. Although time passed by, she is still a charming worm. It is like that as soon as you stand beside her, you will be eager to get her attention and recognition. At the same time, Mrs. Ramsay is unsparing in her efforts to bestow love, making connection and building trust. However, when describing the inner world of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf often uses “a wedge-shaped core of darkness” as a symbol, which makes people wonder whether there is a more complex and mysterious side hidden behind the characteristic of the “selfless dedication”.

“Indeed” implies Mrs. Ramsay’s instinct of dedicating and absolute loyalty to her emotion. While in such a candid utterance, it is not hard to find the implication of irony. The word like “whatever”, “poor fellows”. Mrs. Ramsay calls the lighthouse keeper “poor fellows”, which means she is giving in charity as a noble status. Here Mrs. Ramsay instinctively places herself on the side of the rich and powerful, giving the impression of sympathizing with her inferiors on purpose. And the gifts are the useless things only to make the house untidy. Hence, we can’t help wondering if there is selfishness behind this kindness.

Insinuating, too, as she did the greatness of man’s intellect, even in its decay, the subjection of all wives- not that she blamed the girl, and the marriage had been happy enough, she believed- to their husband’s labors, she made him feel better pleased with himself than he had done yet, and he would have liked, had they taken a cab, for example, to have paid the fare..... (Virginia Woolf, 1927:12)

From the third point of view—Mr. Tansley, the author expresses Mrs. Ramsay’s innate charm and depicts the character’s personality and spiritual appeal. Mrs. Ramsay pours out to Mr. Tansley, showing her trust, which makes Mr. Tansley regain confidence.

The “direct inner monologue” and the “indirect inner monologue” complement each other and describe characters most completely. Not only from their own inner monologues, but also indirectly reflect from the inner monologues of others.

2.2 Symbolic Significance

Between 1912 and 1922 there came a great poetry boom in England and America. To declare their points and modern spirit, the sense of imagery and experience was in large measure the aim of quite a few modern literary movements, of which imagism was one. T. S. Eliot was one of the most important imagism poets in that era. He suggested that the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlate”. The point influenced Woolf to make use of the technique to the extreme. Through various metaphors, images, associations, and even structures, she achieved the effect of symbolic suggestion, which consists of strong subjective color, extraordinary artistic effect. Reading Woolf’s novels is just like reading poems, and this kind of divine representation, the same as Chinese ink painting, is full of unique charm and leisure.

As a stream-of-consciousness novelist, symbolism is unavoidable. Because the subtle psychological activities are unpredictable—can be sensed but not expressed in words. Henri Bergson suggested that we innately know: unless using images that we cannot describe the inner world of human when we study the emotional psychological. (Shidong Wu, 1958)

To Woolf, art is important because it gives meaning to life, helps conquer the inevitable disillusionments of life, and pro-

vides the fulfillment of happiness that nothing else can offer. She believes that art can create a man-made paradise. Let us take one of the most significant images in the novel—the lighthouse as an example. The lighthouse is real, but to the author or to Mrs. Ramsay it is like herself. In one scene, Mrs. Ramsay is sitting by the window. Night is falling, and the sea breeze blowing, the waves rolling. She sees the lighthouse flickering across the shore, and her thoughts leaves her body, merging with its light. She can forget the trouble and sorrow in this brief alone time, to the other side of the carefree shore. At that moment she experiences the very taste of bliss and the true union of the self with the world. Her soul, like that pure light, is washed away, and seems to regain confidence and hope.

3. Conclusion

The harsh social reality of the early 20th century made struggling people face difficult choices. Material intemperance and over-development of science and technology mercilessly tore the traditional culture, dogma into pieces. Faced with such a dilemma, Woolf, different from other contemporary writers, advocated the depiction of reality by means of symbolism and stream of consciousness, aiming at beautifying life rather than crooning the elegy of life. With her sharp eyes, unique feelings and insights, she constantly explored people's deep feelings and experiences, and grasp the truth in the disordered and fragmented reality, moreover, make it unified and harmonious. To the light house is the work when Woolf's mind was at its peak, a perfect combination of poetry and fictional form. Reading the novel is more like a fantastic scroll with profound meaning. The delicate balance between fantasy and reality has reached a higher artistic level. In this novel, objective time, psychological time, subjective truth and objective truth, direct description, symbolic suggestion, are intricately intertwined. Even a tree or a stone, a natural phenomenon or an ordinary event can have completely different ideas and feelings. The multifaced characters, the contemplation of issues beyond the limits of time and space, the poetic lyrical discourse, and the symbolic structural form are all factors that make To the light house a classic work of Woolf. To the lighthouse is framed by the structure of the trilogy with the "lighthouse" as the dominant intention, centered around the spiritual light of Mrs. Ramsay. "Passion-bailment-Passing-Recalling-disillusion" as theme clue with no dramatic plot, but Woolf devoted all her energies to this novel, and she started a new chapter in the history of literature with a whole new writing style. Lily is the character arranged by Woolf for potential double clues and composite layers, who is the author's shadow both in the novel world and outside of it. At the end of the novel, Lily finally paints the image that had haunted her for years. Furthermore, it implies a breakthrough in Woolf's composing career. Woolf tried to describe a picture of balanced and symmetrical life in this simple-plot novel, meanwhile encouraged readers to seek peace and harmony in the external chaos and realize the value of life, which is the crucial ideological significance of the work.

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