

The Stream-of-Consciousness in “The Mark on the Wall”

Li Siyuan^{1,a,*}

¹The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong, Hang Shin Link, Siu Iek Yuen, Shatin, New Territories,
Hong Kong, China

a. siyuanli04@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The chaos and destruction brought about by World War I prompted people to seek new forms of expression. In the 20th century when Woolf lived, women were greatly constrained, and they had almost no time of their own. However, this was also the period when the first wave of feminism began to emerge. By studying Woolf's work, we can see that the pioneers of modernism and feminism had completely different views and perspectives from people who hold traditional techniques. Woolf is famous for her stream-of-consciousness technique; therefore, it is necessary to examine how she uses this technique to express her thoughts in “The Mark on the Wall,” her first venture into the realm of stream-of-consciousness. This paper examines Woolf's attenuation of narrative time and her use of a single character, “I.” In addition, I suggest that the images and personal pronouns used by Woolf also demonstrate her pursuit of freedom and her feminism. Studying Woolf's first stream-of-consciousness short story “The Mark on the Wall” is essential for understanding Woolf's early writing as well as tracing her evolution as a writer.

Keywords: Woolf, Stream-of-Consciousness, freedom, feminism

1. Introduction

The chaos and destruction brought about by the First World War prompted people to seek new forms of expression. The stream-of-consciousness was explored by writers such as Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce as an effective technique to represent modernity. As noted by Lin Shuming, “Because of the war, the radioactivity, instability, introversion, fragmentation, discontinuity, and multi-layeredness of stream-of-consciousness novels have further developed”. [1] Also, Woolf lived in an era when women were greatly constrained, and there was hardly a moment they could call their own. However, this was also a time when the first wave of feminism began to emerge. As Laura Marcus points out, “Woolf's writing and thinking were intertwined with the feminisms of the first half of the century”. [2] Therefore, by studying her works, we can discern that the vanguard of modernism and feminism holds distinct views and perspectives from traditional techniques. “The Mark on the Wall” is a short story created by Virginia Woolf using the modern technique of stream-of-consciousness. Many scholars have delved into how Woolf employs the stream-of-consciousness technique and how it serves to delineate the characters' subjectivity and personality. [3] This essay will build upon previous research and argue that, “The Mark on the Wall,” can reflect her independent and clear thinking. Amidst the apparent chaos, we can decipher her reflections on feminism, freedom, and innovative expressions of stream-of-consciousness.

2. Woolf's writing skills and themes

2.1. Woolf's Feminism and Her Embrace of Freedom

Woolf employs the stream-of-consciousness technique to challenge traditional writing methods. As Shiv K. Kumar points out, “the stream-of-consciousness novelists are primarily concerned with presenting individual personality and experience in terms of artistic sensibility”. [4] In “The Mark on the Wall,” this technique is exemplified by the narrator’s description of the flow of her thoughts: “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it...”. [5] Free association is a commonly used expressive technique in stream-of-consciousness novels, where the flow of consciousness lacks a predetermined order. In Woolf’s later works, she explicitly outlines her writing philosophy. In *Modern Novel*, Woolf criticizes authors like Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy as materialists, taking a non-praising attitude: “It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us”. [6] During Woolf’s era, there was growing skepticism of rationalism. People believed that rationalism eroded the innate nature of human beings, and to bring them back from this deviation, the foundation of rationalism must be dismantled. Woolf shared this perspective, emphasizing the importance of the spirit and the free flow of thoughts. She decisively departed from traditional writing methods in her novels.

In her pursuit of freedom of thought, Woolf departs from a literary tradition that values a “rational” masculinity. As noted by Laura Marcus, there is an “intertwining of feminist and modernist subversions of traditional narrative forms and structures in her work” [2]. This theme is pervasive in ‘The Mark on the Wall.’ The story is narrated from a first-person perspective, and Woolf uses male pronouns only six times throughout the entire story. Most of these male pronouns are used within fantasies to emphasize the insignificance of men. In ‘The Mark on the Wall,’ Woolf portrays a situation where material pursuits clash with spiritual aspirations. She writes, “So he said, and he was in the process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder”. [5] This rift leads to the separation between the narrator and her companion because the man prioritizes material possessions, which contradicts the narrator’s spiritual pursuits. During the era of the industrial revolution, many people prioritized material indulgence over an idyllic life. The man insisted on moving from the countryside to the city to embrace the materialistic life of industrialization. In contrast, the narrator remained rooted in her pursuit of a simpler pastoral life, causing a division between them and leading to a lack of meaningful communication. In Woolf’s works, she predominantly explores issues from a women’s perspective. She narrates the plot from the first-person viewpoint, highlighting the barriers women face in a patriarchal culture. [7] For instance, when the narrator sits quietly in a chair, a man appears in her thoughts, and she initially envisions him as Shakespeare. However, she quickly reduces him to simply “a man.” While most people would refer to Shakespeare directly, out of respect, the narrator downplays it and refers to him as “a man.” This is because the narrator sees Shakespeare as a figure from the past and wishes to break away from existing paradigms. As the narrator laments, “But how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn’t interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a path indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the most pleasant thoughts”. [5] Even the most authoritative figures, such as Shakespeare, are relegated to the past in the narrator’s view, and she strives to explore new ideas and employ innovative techniques of her own. In fact, this isn’t the only instance where Woolf uses the literary giant Shakespeare as a symbol of the patriarchal system.

The same perspective on women’s rights can be observed in another of Woolf’s works. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf presents a fictionalized story about Shakespeare’s sister, Judith, who possesses equal talent but faces a tragic fate. Judith’s opportunities for education were limited due to her gender, and she was frequently interrupted by the sewing work her parents assigned to her. Unfortunately,

her parents arranged her marriage, and when she refused, she suffered severe beatings and fled to London. Even in the city, Judith had no control over her own destiny. In an era where women were discouraged from entering the public sphere, it was unsurprising that Judith was rejected by every theater she approached. Her poetic talent had no outlet, and she tragically ended her life on a winter night. This was the destiny of talented women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the situation for “Judiths” was only marginally better. Some chose to publish their own works, like Jane Austen, while others adopted male pseudonyms, such as Charlotte Brontë and Mary Evans (Mary Ann Evans, 1819-1880). Just as *A Room of One’s Own* reveals the plight of women, Woolf’s discontent with patriarchy is also evident in ‘The Mark on the Wall.’ It is worth acknowledging that Woolf’s father provided her with a personal education. Still, as Jean Moorcraft Wilson points out:

Following the custom and conventions of the day, so much more money and attention was devoted to boys than to girls, that Woolf was later indignant that all the family funds were spent on giving boys a good education and leaving her and sister Vanessa alone to accept father and miscellaneous family.[8]

Therefore, Woolf employs personal pronouns to express her feminism, suggesting that she does not believe that famous writers like Shakespeare must inherently be superior, as women were often denied the opportunity to achieve such status.

2.2. Stream-of-Consciousness Techniques in “The Mark on the Wall”

Emancipated from traditional literary conventions that prioritize rationalism, Woolf experiments with the stream-of-consciousness. In “The Mark on the Wall,” several stream-of-consciousness techniques are evident, such as the attenuation of narrative time and the use of a single character, “I.” These techniques serve the purpose of accentuating individual subjectivity, focusing on the characters’ thoughts, and embodying a sense of freedom. Firstly, concerning the weakening of narrative time, there are few, if any, symbolic words to represent the passage and flow of time. As Qv Shijing aptly points out, “Stream-of-consciousness novels cannot be compared with traditional plot advancement due to their unique perspective of observation”. [9] In the story, the narrator appears to be continually engrossed in studying the spots on the wall. What exactly is the nature of this mark? The passage of time becomes inconsequential when pondering this question. The narrative revolves around the narrator’s internal musings, traversing from ancient eras to the present, and even transcending the boundaries of nature into the realm of her own thoughts, all inspired by the spot on the wall within the room. Furthermore, Woolf’s portrayal of characters is also innovative. Conventional novels typically feature characters that drive the plot forward, but in this short story, there is only one character—the narrator. Her self-awareness delves deep into her thoughts, not describing the external world beyond the mark but solely illuminating her inner world.

Another technique employed in “The Mark on the Wall” that reflects Woolf’s use of the stream-of-consciousness is the focus on the single person and their physical space. Unlike traditional novels that typically present readers with characters featuring distinct characteristics, Woolf’s short stories tend to delve into the characters’ internal self-consciousness.[10] Traditionally, character development relies heavily on the portrayal of the character’s living environment, speech, and behavior. “Even in a character brimming with different and contradictory personalities, their character traits remain clearly identifiable and unique”. [10] However, the narrator in this short story lacks distinctive personality traits, actions, or expressions. Instead, the narrator’s self-awareness permeates the text. This sense of “I” acts as a reflection and judgment, preventing readers from passing judgments on the narrator herself. What’s crucial is the constant stream of thought within the narrator’s mind, akin to an uninterrupted undercurrent. “In traditional novels, characters appear to react passively to situations, with their consciousness veiled by the vast external environment”. [10]

Characters in traditional novels must navigate rich environments and complex plots that largely dictate their responses. Their actions are driven passively, not dominated by their own desires. As Huang and Shi note, “Woolf chose to depict characters differently because she aimed to highlight human subjectivity, rather than mere human sociability”. [10] “In the subconsciousness of the first-person narrator, there is a pursuit for beautiful things, and this is the eternal human nature and an aspect of human existence”. [11] Such a subconscious world serves as a refuge from the real world. In contrast, modern individuals often find themselves alienated not only from the world and others but also from their own selves. The feeling of alienation truly embodies the sense of emptiness in human existence. What Woolf conveys in her works is the condition of a stranger out of tune with the world. [11] Thus, characters crafted by Woolf contemplate their environment and shape their own lives through the flow of thoughts and subconsciousness. This serves as a means of escaping reality and revitalizing their spirits. Modern society’s alienation from the individual may hinder direct challenges and changes to the social environment through action, but it allows for introspective reflection and critical examination of human existence and society. [12]

2.3. Imagery and Language in “The Mark on the Wall”

Woolf’s use of imagery and language in this short story also embodies her pursuit of freedom. In Woolf’s works, the conventional plot of the story loses its significance, giving way to a myriad of daydreams and expressions of imagery. For example, the traces of the nails prompt the narrator to envision a portrait of a noble lady and the beauty of nature. At the beginning of the story, when the narrator encounters an indistinct blob, her thoughts meander through ponderings about the mysteries of life, the fallibility of human thoughts, and the limitations of human knowledge. She imagines a delightful world devoid of authoritative standards, a realm of freedom that transcends societal norms. These imaginative flights are spurred by the pursuit of freedom. Woolf champions feminism, critiques the male-dominated rule-making, and embodies the quest for a liberated spirit. Like what Woolf wrote:

“A world without professors or specialists or housekeepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one’s thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the waterlilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs.... How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections—if it were not for Whitaker’s Almanack—if it were not for the Table of Precedency” [5]!

Why does Woolf fantasize the world? Because the real world is so ugly, as Peng remarks: “The real world perceived by rationality is the relationship between people and people, and between people and the world, which has been strongly distorted by the abnormal development of science and technology and material civilization and the oppression of war.”. [13] These illusory fantasies are the subjects Woolf truly desires to explore. Even seemingly meaningless blobs serve as tools in her writing, as all her imaginative images are anchored to these spots. Since direct statements or descriptions cannot adequately capture the complexities of reality, [14] symbolists employ a medium comprising intricate chains of ideas, represented by a fusion of metaphors. [15]

The spiral-like narrative structure mirrors the ‘S’ elements present, represented by the snail and the nail, shaping a concrete narrative structure [16]. The presence of a snail also holds a deeper significance. In English, the words ‘nails’ on the wall and ‘snails’ are written differently. However, an intriguing similarity between these two words lies in the initial letter, ‘S’. In Woolf’s writing, an incredible connection between the flow of consciousness and reality emerges through the interplay between these two concepts. At the start of the narrative, the narrator stumbles upon the spots on the wall by chance and initially interprets them as traces left by nails. Building upon this foundation, she embarks on a multi-layered reverie. Nonetheless, the narrator cannot indefinitely remain immersed in such subjective imaginings and ceaseless speculations. Although the flow of consciousness is

remarkably unrestrained, it is still necessary to address real-world issues.[16] Consequently, the narrator eventually gazes at the spot on the wall, revealing that it is not a nail but a snail. This conclusion marks the culmination of all streams of consciousness, not only providing answers to the initial questions but also closely adhering to the theme of reality. As Northrop points out, “the writer’s uniquely distinguishing imagery structure which was present even in his earlier work and which does not and cannot fundamentally change” .[17] This is evident in “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf’s first venture into the realm of stream-of-consciousness. Furthermore, the titles of many of Woolf’s later works, such as *Jacob’s Room*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, are thematic images representing her works. These thematic images often serve as crucial elements connecting the entire novel and play a pivotal role in expressing the underlying themes. Returning to the short story, the answer to the mysterious spot on the wall is ultimately revealed to be a snail. The image of the snail is a central thematic element in this narrative. It also reappears in Woolf’s later works, such as *Cathalpa Garden Miscellaneous Notes* and *Orlando*. The snail’s image serves as a significant clue for the study of Woolf’s ideology. As commonly known, snails carry their houses (volute) on their backs, allowing them to move freely throughout their lives. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf employs the concept of a ‘house’ as a metaphor for women’s desire for independent and liberated space. This signifies women’s aspirations for an autonomous and free domain.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, “The Mark on the Wall” stands as Woolf’s inaugural venture into the world of stream-of-consciousness writing. Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing style derives from the subconscious, serving as a vehicle for reflecting her profound thoughts and emotional needs, while maintaining a certain degree of authenticity. Through the application of the stream-of-consciousness technique, Woolf pioneers a new form of expression in her pursuit of freedom. Woolf employs irrational creative forms in her narrative, such as the concatenation and accumulation of images, the free flow of consciousness, and a singular narrator. These techniques serve as acts of rebellion against the rational sobriety of the real world, seeking fresh sources of expression and understanding. Furthermore, Woolf resided in an era where numerous feminists celebrated modernism as a movement open to the “feminine,” the “androgynous,” and cross-sexual ideals, as well as patriarchal deconstruction.[18] Indeed, within “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf articulates her feminism by critiquing the rules and authority established by men. To comprehensively study this trailblazing figure in 20th-century modernism and feminism, it is essential to scrutinize her maiden stream-of-consciousness work. As Woolf herself aptly put it: “I shall never forget the day I wrote ‘The Mark on the Wall’ – all in a flash, as if flying, after being kept by stone breaking for months. I saw, branching out of the tunnel I made, when I discovered that method of approach, *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, ect. – How I trembled with excitement”.[5] This short story can be regarded as her audacious and experimental undertaking, providing a blueprint for the utilization of stream-of-consciousness in her subsequent literary works. Thus, comprehending Woolf’s early creations is imperative in tracing her evolution as a writer.

References

- [1] Lin, S. M. (1996). *Woolf Struggling in the Shadow of War*. *20th Century Foreign Literature*, no. 3, p.72.
- [2] Marcus. L. (2000). *Woolf’s feminism and feminism’s Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] For the discussion on weakening of narrative time, see Qv, S.J. (1997). *Stream-of-Consciousness Novelist Woolf*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House; for the discussion on changing the way of depicting characters, see Huang, H. H., & Shi, M. (2021). *The Spot on the Wall’ and the Character Aesthetics of Woolf’s Modernist Novels*. *Journal of Mudanjiang Institute of Education*, no.5, p.6.
- [4] Kumar. S. K. (1963). *Bergson and the Stream-of-consciousness Novel*. New York: New York University Press.
- [5] Woolf, V., & Bradshaw, D. (2008). *The mark on the wall and other short fiction*. Oxford University Press.

- [6] Woolf, V. (1925). *The common reader: first series*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p.151.
- [7] Huang, H. (2017). *Analysis of the Artistic Features of "Spots on the Wall"*. *Language construction*, no.33, p.31.
- [8] Jean M. Wilson. J. M. (1987). *Virginia Woolf: Life and London*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- [9] Qv. S. J. (1997). *Stream-of-consciousness novelist Woolf*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
- [10] Huang, H. H., & Shi, M. (2021). "The Spot on the Wall" and the Character Aesthetics of Woolf's Modernist Novels. *Journal of Mudanjiang Institute of Education*, no.5, p.6.
- [11] Liu, M. Y. (2015). *Rationality and Order in Irrationality: Creative Techniques in "A Spot on the Wall"*. *Foreign Language Education Research*, vol. 3, no.2, p.16.
- [12] Huang, H. H., & Shi, M. "The Spot on the Wall" and the Character Aesthetics of Woolf's Modernist Novels. *Journal of Mudanjiang Institute of Education*, no.5, p.8.
- [13] Peng, C.Y. (2006). *Special Topics in Western Modernism Literature*. Hu Nan: Hunan University Press.
- [14] Bergson, H. (1903). *An Introduction of Metaphysics*, p. 59.
- [15] Edmund Wilson, E., & Gordon, M. (1931). *Double Down: Axel's Castle*.
- [16] Hao, J. W. (2022). *Narrative Strategies of the Modernist Novel "A Spot on the Wall"*. *Drama house*, no.36, p.189.
- [17] Northrop F. (1998). *The Road to Criticism*. Bei Jing: Peking University Press.
- [18] Susan Sniader Lanser. S. S. (2023). *Fictions of Authority*. New York: Cornell University Press.