

# Virginia Woolf's Modernist Confessional Fictions

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**VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MODERNIST CONFSSIONAL FICTIONS**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## **Abstract**

Virginia Woolf, as a modernist writer, sought out a novel approach to writing fiction deeming traditional and conventional narrative techniques inadequate to convey human psychologies and experiences in a rapidly changing world after the First World War. Woolf plunges into her characters' intimate and personal thoughts, 'digs tunnels' through their interior worlds and brings human consciousness to the forefront of her novels. Their observations and recollections are equally crucial for their characterisation as external perceptions of other characters. Immersed in their thoughts, time appears to pass differently for each character. Memories from the past intrude upon their present experiences and along with an explosion of thoughts and feelings comprise a collage of human consciousness. Whether Woolf got her inspiration from Bergson's theory of duration or the dual conceptualisation of time proposed by Moore and Russell, one thing is certain, Woolf attempted to 'come closer to life' in her novels by translating into words the myriad of impressions that fall upon our minds during ordinary days. That is why her novels reduce the plot and time and focus on human consciousness. Woolf relies on past traumas and crystallises certain moments in her characters' lives and memories for her readers to experience the beauty of fleeting moments. Besides subjective perception of time and impressionistic images, Woolf weaves characters, reminiscences, and sentiments that echo her personal experiences in her novels. Obsession with a tyrant father, missing mother figure, ensnarement of a Victorian ideal of femininity, artistic concerns, death, illness, trauma are the staples of her life that found their way into her fiction. Literature was her medium of expressing and alleviating her obsessions and traumas. In addition to exploring subjective perception of time of Woolf's characters, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate just how reliant Woolf's confessional fiction is on her personal life, that is, it will explore the boundary between autobiography and fictionality.

**Key words:** Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, subjective perception of time, confessional writing, autobiography, fictionality

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## Introduction

*How much does a man live, after all?  
Does he live a thousand days, or one only?  
For a week, or for several centuries?  
How long does a man spend dying?  
What does it mean to say "for ever"?*

Pablo Neruda: *And How Long?* (1958)

*Cuánto vive el hombre, por fin?  
Vive mil días o uno solo?  
Una semana o varios siglos?  
Por cuánto tiempo muere el hombre?  
Qué quiere decir "Para siempre"?*

Pablo Neruda: *Y cuánto vive?* (1958)

Life is not measured in days we get to spend in this world. Life cannot be measured with a calendar or a clock. Our experiential reality, composed of our thoughts, perceptions, observations, memories, intruding upon our minds, can last for a single day, but it can surpass a lifetime. *What does it mean to say 'for ever'?* It means leaving a part of your reality behind, living on in others. Through her honest, confessional fiction, Virginia Woolf left a part of herself that will remain *'for ever'*.

Neruda's lines instigate our thinking about life, death, time, and remembrance. These are all recurring themes abundantly present in Virginia Woolf's prose. The thesis will delve into Virginia Woolf's novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, with a more focused look at the confessional and autobiographical echoes and the subjectivity of time.

The thesis is going to explore Woolf's confessional writing and her modes of wielding narrative techniques (the first-person narration, the use of the stream of consciousness, free indirect discourse) to express temporality, or rather discrepancy between time and duration. Considering that Woolf's narration plunges into characters' interior worlds and shifts, almost

imperceptibly, from one character's thoughts to another's or from their presents to their pasts, the thesis is going to demonstrate how such an internal approach of portraying characters reflects their development and growth.

The thesis conveys firstly the theoretical and critical insights into modernist representation of time. The passing hours in Woolf's novels do not equate with 'duration' in the minds of her characters, for time is in fact presented as a series of moments. The shortest of the three sections of *To the Lighthouse* spans ten years, whereas the two others cover only two days. The entirety of the plot in *Mrs Dalloway* takes place in less than 24 hours; however, Woolf's 'tunnels' and 'moments of being' unravel characters' whole lifetimes. The 'tunnelling process' allows Woolf to express the humanness of the characters, so the thesis will delve into a struggling artist's insecurities (as a reflection of Woolf's personal struggles), diverging parenting influences (emotion vs rationality) and their subsequent consequences, inability to express true emotions, being (un)able to confess trauma and its outcomes. Virginia Woolf relies on past traumas and crystallises memories and the moments in her characters' lives for her readers to experience the beauty of fleeting moments.

Before tackling Woolf's prose, the thesis will briefly delineate literary Modernism and provide core insights into Seymour Chatman and Gérard Genette's narrative studies. Woolf's experimentation with temporality will be easier to understand following a short overview of the relevant philosophers' conceptualisation of time that influenced her writing, Henry Bergson's theory of duration and George Edward Moore and Bertrand Russell's realism in particular. Finally, the thesis will attempt to illuminate (dis)similarity of literary confession to autobiography and religious act.

## **1. Modernism**

### **1.1 Literary Modernism and ‘stream of consciousness’**

With industrialisation, changes in class and social dynamics, and developments in sciences and technology in the late 19th and early 20th century, along came changes in human behaviour and thinking. Modernism, the turn of the century movement in society and culture, saw many artists and writers trying to navigate the new reality and express it through art. They wanted their work to reflect life. For a generation born into the last decades of the Victorian era, yet whose maturity coincided with technological innovation, scientific revolution and the destructive rupture of world war, the sense of living in a new age was acute, and what had become the conventional forms of fiction seemed inappropriate, even hostile, to the depiction of their contemporary moment (Parsons 2007: 2).

To present the outer world as realistically and objectively as possible, what was the main focus of Realism, was no longer sufficient. The true emphasis used to be on the mimetic representation of reality. That is why pages and pages had been written on the behaviour and development of characters in the exterior reality without exploring their psyche or interior worlds. However, this is not to say that novelists have never before ventured out into the interior worlds of their characters. Excursions into their creations’ psychologies can be traced back in the continental novel of Dostoevsky and Flaubert, and the fictional outputs of George Eliot, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. The psychological novels with experimentation and exploration of human consciousness are precursors of modernist novels. Modernist novel, on the other hand, arises with radical changes; it reduces the plot severely and explores the depths of human

consciousness. Modernism is, thus, in part a revolution against the Realist movement with its conventions and tradition that can no longer represent the reality of the changing world of disrupted stability.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), one of the most influential intellectual and literary figures in Modernism, went on to seek out a novel approach to writing fiction deeming traditional and conventional narrative techniques inadequate to render a rapidly changing reality. Modern times and modern ideas demanded new forms and new literary techniques (Parsons 2007: 53). The modernist novelists ought to record factual information and mundane observances, but as well as endeavour to convey the philosophical and emotional human experience. When Woolf calls for the reformation of the modern novel, it is persistently in the name of *life* (Hägglund 2012: 77). To achieve that, the new novel should have ‘something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose’ (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 1986-94, vol.3: 435).

Hägglund (2012: 77-78) argues that the conventional narrative techniques bring forth the depictions of reality in which ‘life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worthwhile’, as Woolf asserted in her essay *Modern Fiction* (*The Common Reader: First Series* 1984: 149). In the essay she proposes to challenge traditional modes of representation and explore other possibilities as she would in her fictions, like *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, for ‘to come closer to life’ the writers simply have to take notice of numerous impressions and observations that constitute each particle of our everyday experience:

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 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 old; the moment of importance came not here but there.... 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.... This method has the merit of bringing us closer to what we were prepared to call life itself (*The Common Reader: First Series* 1984: 150).

Woolf was adamant to portray her characters as authentically as possible by exploring their rich interior worlds, even on an uneventful mundane day in their life, when myriads of atoms and impressions fall upon their minds on an ordinary day. She refused to portray time, plot or character in the expected, conventional way of the novel, but she takes trivial incidents from everyday life and explores their hidden significance (Parsons 2007: 51). Her experiments with narrative technique, structure, and style are not, however, a turn away from realism, but a challenge to those conventions of realism (Hägglund 2012: 77) that fail to render the mental state of the changing society after the atrocities of the World War and changes in industrialisation and technology.

The challenge before the artists, like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, was then to create art that goes beyond the realist mirror of reality. Their art was to be formally radical, subjectively real and aesthetically autonomous, expressive of a world in which the present seems dislocated from the past, experience is fragmented, multiple and limitless, and previous certainties about the physical world and our selfhood within it have been swept away (Parsons 2007: 3). This literary revolution resulted in what became known as the ‘psychological’ novel, or commonly known as ‘stream of consciousness or ‘modernist’ novel.

In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James, an American psychologist and philosopher, writes about the growingly popular inward-looking approach to the exploration of interior life of an individual: ‘the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover’ (James 1981: 185). He believed our minds can be construed as a river or a stream through which continuously flow our thoughts, sensations, impressions, recollections, and so forth. Such disjointed personal and introspective fragments constitute our interior world. Henry James, his brother, along with a number of other writers, like Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce, employed ‘stream of consciousness’ style of writing to inspect personal consciousness of their characters. It was William James who introduced the term ‘stream of consciousness’ but May Sinclair who related it to literature. In 1918, May Sinclair reviewed for the literary magazine *The Egoist* Dorothy Richardson’s novels (the first three novels in Richardson’s semi-autobiographical *Pilgrimage* series) in which the author had utilised the modern techniques to describe the interior world of her protagonist, Miriam Henderson:

In this series there is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson’s stream of consciousness going on and on. And in neither is there any discernible beginning or middle or end [...] In identifying herself with this life, which is Miriam’s stream of consciousness, Miss Richardson produces her effect of being the first, of getting closer to reality than any of our novelists who are trying so desperately to get close. (Kime Scott 1990: 444)

Sinclair borrowed the term ‘stream of consciousness’ from the realm of psychology to compliment Richardson on her stylistic innovations. The review marks the first time the term was used to describe a literary concept.

The ‘stream of consciousness’ novels abandon conventional narrative techniques, traditional plot organisation, omniscient narration, chronological approach to time delineation, and in their place we can find fragmentation, reduced time span, alternating focal characters, multiperspectivity, introspection, self-reflexivity, as well as free indirect discourse and interior monologues of characters as a replacement for the guiding voice of a narrator. The thoughts and observations are oftentimes presented explicitly rendering the natural fluctuation of thoughts in human consciousness.

Arguably one of the greatest representatives of the ‘stream of consciousness’ novel is Virginia Woolf, whose novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, will be further explored, specifically with regard to confessional approach to writing fiction and temporal innovation.

## **1.2 Views on narratology**

Innovation in modernist approach to storytelling cannot be discussed without returning to basics. This will help to demonstrate how modernist writers utilised and sometimes toyed with or subverted narrative concepts and strategies to bring consciousness to the forefront, that is, bring their stories into being. The basic dichotomy in narrative discourse is the one between a story and discourse. Structuralist theory argues that each narrative is comprised of a story (*histoire*) and discourse (*discours*). An internationally acclaimed film and literary critic who helped to establish the field of narratology, Seymour Chatman (1978: 19), following in the steps of the structuralists Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Tzvetan Todorov, further elaborates it: the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted whereas discourse is the *how*. The story presents the ‘content’ or the

‘chain of events’ (actions and happenings) as well as the ‘existents’ (characters and items of settings). Discourse, on the other hand, is the means by which that content is communicated, or rather the discourse is the expression of the narrative text.

The story can be explained as our conceptualisation of what the narrative is about. Discourse is the way the story is presented to the audience, which means it does not have to deliver events in the chronological sequence or focus on a single perspective. It is the telling of the story and insofar there is telling, there must be a teller, a narrating voice (Chatman 1978: 146). Chatman distinguishes between overt and covert narrators. In covert narration we hear a voice speaking of events, characters, and setting, but its owner remains hidden in the discursive shadows (Chatman 1978: 197) whereas an overt narrator makes his presence immediately felt (Chatman 1978: 219). Another key figure of narratology, a literary structuralist theorist Gérard Genette (1980), makes a distinction between a narrator who is present in the story (homodiegetic narrator, or autodiegetic narrator if they are a protagonist and tell their own story) and a narrator who is not present in the story (heterodiegetic narrator).

Genette (1980: 186-190) was not only concerned with the question of the narrative voice (*who speaks?*) but also with the narrative perspective (*who sees?*). The matter of perspective was resolved by drawing upon Jean Pouillon and Tzvetan Todorov’s three-term typology: (1) the narrative with omniscient narrator, where the narrator knows and says more than any of the characters know (*Narrator > Character*), or ‘vision from behind’, (2) the narrative with ‘point of view’, where the narrator says only what a given character knows (*Narrator = Character*), or ‘vision within’, and (3) the ‘objective’ or ‘behaviourist’ narrative, where the narrator says less than the character knows (*Narrator < Character*), or ‘vision from without’. The first type Genette

expanded as narrative with *zero focalisation*, which is oftentimes used in Woolf's experimental fiction, the second type as narrative with *internal focalisation*, and the third type as narration with *external focalisation*.

Internal focalisation further branches into: (a) *fixed*, where there is only one focal character, (b) *variable*, where there are various focal characters in different scenes, and (c) *multiple*, where there are multiple focal characters for a single event, that is, the same event is told multiple times but each time through another focal character.

There are three states of characters' speech, be it uttered or 'inner', which connect them to our present subject, which is called narrative 'distance', according to Genette (1980: 171): (1) *narratised (narrated)* speech, which is the most reduced speech but most mimetic narrative mode, and can be considered to be like a narrative of thoughts, or narratised inner speech; then (2) *transported* speech in indirect style which must not be equated with 'free indirect style' and in which narrator's mediation is more evident; and finally (3) *reported* speech, where the narrator pretends literally to give the floor to his characters.

Free indirect style, or free indirect discourse, differs from direct speech and indirect speech in several ways (Jones 1997: 70), despite its similarities in grammar and appearance to indirect speech. Jones demonstrates with the following examples:

1. Mary turned, stared, and asked herself, "Are these the tulips I saw here yesterday?" (direct speech)
2. Mary turned, stared, and asked herself if these were the tulips she had seen there the day

before. (indirect speech)

3. Mary turned and stared. Were these the tulips she had seen here yesterday?" (free indirect style)

Free indirect style comprises syntactically the form of both an authorial report (past tense, third person), usual for indirect speech, and an utterance that is not entirely reported but expressed by the character's immediate speaking voice. The narrative innovation, first identified and named in 1912 by De Saussure's student Charles Bally as *style indirect libre* (translated as 'free indirect style') is a narrative technique that exposes shifts in consciousness, dramatizes the 'myriad impressions' and develops characters in ways that simple direct and direct discourse can not (Jones 1997: 70).

### **1.3 Philosophical conceptualisation of temporality (Bergson, Moore, Russell)**

When discussing the matter of temporality and personal or subjective perception of time, the influence of Henri Bergson simply cannot be overlooked. One of the most influential and prominent French Continental philosophers, Henri Bergson's (1859-1941), theories had a profound influence on modernist literature, including Woolf's work. Among other concepts, Bergson explored the question of time and described in what ways time can be perceived. He rose to prominence with his disapproval of Western civilisation's quantifying time, which means organising and measuring time in quantifiable temporal units, as opposed to experiencing the quality of time. Through the subjective consciousness we experience time as it truly is: a

continuum in which past and present interpenetrate or melt into each other (Parsons 2007: 111). This is what Bergson called duration or *la durée*, and it is the concept which would allow for the qualitative, rather than quantitative, experience of time.

Bergson distinguished between the intuitive and the rational self, the latter of which comprehends time by organising it into a standard, linear fashion (like we would measure the passage of time with clocks and calendars) and this is how duration, this long and somewhat incomprehensible concept of time becomes translated into something comprehensible, into clock-time. However, Bergson never detached clock-time from duration. He believed that time only exists as duration, and the clock is merely the convenient but inadequate means by which a mechanistic world conceives and represents it (Parsons 2007). In his seminal work, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), he wrote about our inability to conceptualise and fully grasp this duration. Human minds can only comprehend parts of it through images and fragments which we tie together using our imagination and acquired experience.

The progression of time, on the other hand, seemingly undermines Bergson's theory of duration, which has been met with criticism as much as it has been praised. Time imminently passes and moves forward, whether in different or the same pace for everyone, but Bergson suggested that all of our past experiences do not simply fade away or belong to the past but remain in our consciousness and conflate into our respective durations. By denying this progression of time, that is, negativity, Hägglund (2012) asserts, Bergson effectively denies time. While Bergson emphasizes that nothing is exempt from temporality, his conception of the true reality of time does not involve negation or negativity. The temporal passes away, but it does not disappear or cease to be. On the contrary, it immediately belongs to the continuous movement of

duration (*la durée*), which preserves all of the past in a virtual coexistence that is not susceptible to loss or destruction (Hägglund 2012: 15).

Virginia Woolf was familiar with Bergson's work and some of his views on the subjective perception of time interested her for the comments in *Orlando: A Biography* (1927): 'extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind' tell us that she was aware of and influenced by the key tenets of his philosophy, despite Woolf's own insinuations to Harmon H. Goldstone in a 1932 letter: "I may say that I have never read Bergson" (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 1975-80, vol.5: 92).

Anne Banfield (2003) proposed that Woolf was not solely inspired by Bergson's theories but that she adopted George Edward Moore and Bertrand Russell's dualistic concept of time. They distinguished between an experienced temporal discontinuity and an illusory continuousness of moments and experiences, in the vein of Bergson's duration. The realism they were proposing was predicated on the refutation of idealism, which maintained the unreality and illusion of time. Their philosophical framework had the major intellectual influence on the Bloomsbury Group, the literary and philosophic association of which Virginia Woolf was one of the founding members.

Russell (1914) believed the sensory aspect of our experiences is comprehensible but ineffable, available for us to feel but nearly impossible to define. Bergson's concept of duration as interwoven past and present experiences was deemed flawed by Russell for he asserted our experiences are discontinuous and that they reveal the fragmentation of the sensible world around us. Fragments of it are moments that are available for us to experience. George E. Moore's



(1953) uncertainty whether we ‘do directly apprehend any time or not’ (as cited in Banfield 2003: 480) refutes Bergson’s duration as well, and just like Russell, Moore comprehends time as ‘a succession of distinct, noninterpenetrating units, directly apprehended only one at a time’ (Banfield 2003: 480), with these temporal units being ‘moments’.

Bergson went on to claim that only time we experience, what he called duration, was real time whereas the time which our clocks divide into equal portions (Bergson, 1960), that is, the physical time was not real but merely space sans duration. Conceptually considered, he [Bergson] says, time is assimilated to space, depicted as a straight line with ‘moments’ as its points, whereas experienced time is *duration*, not a succession of moments – it flows in an invisibly continuity (Passmore 1966, as cited in Banfield 2003: 480). For Russell, on the other hand, the physical notion of time is characterised by continuity and is, in fact, real time. One moment invariably follows another, unlike our past experiences and recollections which add up to Bergson’s duration and occur at different moments in life, not constantly and not continuously. Continuity does not belong to experienced but to physical time – hence the illusion of duration (Banfield 2003: 484).

Whether Woolf adopted Bergson’s duration or Moore and Russell’s realism, one thing is certain, her prose undeniably differentiates between ‘time on the clock’ and ‘time in the mind’ (referenced in *Orlando: A Biography*, 1928), or ‘mind time’ and ‘actual time’ (referenced in *Between the Acts*, 1941), and is in accordance with nearly every influential philosophical conception of time: making a distinction between experienced time and physical time.

## 2. Confessional writing

### 2.1 Confession

Virginia Woolf's fiction is oftentimes contemplative, melancholic, poetic, and reliant on the consciousness of the characters with the plot and dialogue significantly reduced. One could argue that the majority of 'action' in her novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and especially *To the Lighthouse* (1927), takes place in the minds of her characters, whose reflections, thoughts, and observations are presented effortlessly and seemingly without authoress' intermediation. One way of achieving such a literary feat, besides by employing 'stream of consciousness' style or interior monologues, is confessional writing.

What is then confessional literature? Why do we confess? Brooks (2001) claims that we do not really know what we think of confessions or what we want them to be or to do. Confessions have different meanings for each confessor. To confess can mean to alleviate the pain, to reveal our sins and ask for repentance, to share our experiences, find someone to share it all with. It is in our nature to unburden our souls and minds and to look for someone going through the same ordeal, possibly even to help them, or to ultimately help ourselves. One way of doing so can be via the medium of literature, especially through confessional writing. Confessional writers thus alleviate their sorrows and concerns, whereas readers learn that their feelings, fears, longings are not unique to them – they learn that they are not alone.

Confessional writing instigates numerous questions. Who confesses and why? Should they follow a pattern and form of confessional literature and is there one? Is a literary confession

the same as a religious confession, the first association many of us will most likely have upon hearing the word ‘confession’?

To understand what confessional literature encompasses we need to explore the concept of confession itself. Michel Foucault (1981: 61-62) sees confession as ‘a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.’

We can surmise that confessing occurs in the presence of someone ready to listen to the confessor’s thoughts, sins, or confessions, be it an actual person before us or a distant reader, possibly miles, even years away. By confessing we are constructing a narrative of our thoughts, reflections, and experiences; we are exchanging our truths for understating, sympathy, possibly even repentance. Gill (2006: 4) believes confession to be ‘not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth’. It is a mode of interaction, that is, conversation and bonding humans are inherently prone to. As humans are social creatures who seek company and wither in solitude, confessions are instrumental to forming and preserving human relationships.

## 2.2 St Augustine's *Confessions*

Foucault (1988, as cited in Gill 2006: 4) looks for the roots of 'the technologies of the self' he identifies in Western culture in the development of early Greek and Roman philosophies and primitive Christianity. Often erroneously cited as the first Western autobiography, the *Confessions* of St Augustine of Hippo (397-398 CE) holds a special place in that period and heralds confessional and autobiographical narrative in Western civilisation. This voluminous text delivers St Augustine's philosophy and his recollections as well as his confessions of sins and temptations from his past, which he atones by confessing his faith. The text is significant as a model partly because of its structure, with its repeated use of apostrophe and its perpetual questioning of self, faith, and God, and partly because it offers an example of the development and representation of a unique, unified subject (the confessing 'I') in dialogue with an other (Tambling 1990, as cited in Gill 2006: 5).

Self-examination and time dimension are two aspects thoroughly explored in the *Confessions*, as Bouregbi (2017) observes in his discussion of St Augustine's philosophy in his most contemplative text, which he relates to Woolf's confessional fiction *To the Lighthouse*. Even though centuries and worldviews apart, Bouregbi sets out to demonstrate that St Augustine and Virginia Woolf were quite similar in their respective contemplations, i.e. confessions. Even though St Augustine predominantly confesses his sins and avows God's eternal glory, his intellectual and philosophical introspection delivers his views on temporal connectivity to discovering oneself as an essential part of God's created cosmos, as well as on our intimate self-exploration, which he perceives as confessions of our innermost truths to God.

St Augustine believes that human nature can get the sense of time perception through linearity and contemplation, two entwining concepts which constitute the self. These internal and external aspects of time are essential parts of human being: it is through them that human being is felt as a part of the world (Bouregbi 2017: 18). Woolf predominantly chooses to focus on subjective perception of time in her characters, meaning we can experience the entirety of their lives through memories and recollections in matter of merely minutes, so Woolf's predilection for 'mind time' corroborates St Augustine's assertion that 'time is more interior than exterior' (Bouregbi 2017: 17).

The way Virginia Woolf employs time in the service of self-examination and introspection goes in line with St Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the author claims that not only are time and mind inseparable but they define one another (Bouregbi 2017). Distancing oneself from this subjective time, or Woolf's 'mind time' can only be verified through motion and duration. The latter is a concept introduced by Henri Bergson and employed in an adapted version by Woolf.

The confessional mode of narration in the *Confessions* pertains to inwardness and self-exploration and discovery. To confess is to reveal the inward reality to an outward Reality, to Divinity, to God (Bouregbi 2017: 25). And finally what indubitably connects St Augustine's religious confessions and Woolf's literary confessions is self-discovery and revelation through narrative expression: the word (Bouregbi 2017).

### 2.3 Fictionality vs (auto)biography

Besides fiction, Woolf was interested in biography, an interest she inherited from her father, Leslie Stephen, who was the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Focusing on prominent figures in national history, the *Dictionary of National Biography* left out common people what bothered Virginia Woolf who wanted to capture ‘the spirit we live by, life itself’ (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 1986-94, vol. 3: 436). The representation of identity was a purpose in which Woolf regarded the genres of biography and fiction to be closely linked (Parsons 2007: 72).

McIntire (2008: 123) has suggested that Woolf had ‘an abiding obsession with life writing’, including biography, memoirs, letters, diaries, and fiction. The paratexts (in the likes of her letters, diaries, inscriptions, etc.) often corroborate her authorial intentions and help establish connections between her life and fiction. In her early phase of writing she was already entangling a dynamic interpenetration between life and fictionality. The person’s identity, which is a combination of character and soul, and its adaptation, be it in literature or on a stage, become lost in each other. Such complicated a model of identity, harbouring a radical interpenetration of subjectivities, Woolf proposed years before publishing her first novel and thus anticipated an important tenet of modernist writing: a fundamental instability of self and cogito (McIntire 2008: 124).

Her third, much more experimental, novel *Jacob’s Room* (1922) brought to the forefront a central character whose identity is explored only through other characters’ perceptions. Woolf’s radical exploration of self, oftentimes in connection to the world around us, is a hallmark of her

new approach to writing fiction. In 1922 when her novel was published, Woolf wrote in her diary: ““I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something *in my own voice*” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-84, vol.2: 186, original emphasis), what can be regarded in part as her confessional credo.

Woolf’s life was riddled with tragedies: death of her mother and siblings, emotional abuse, sexualised ill-treatment from her half-brothers, estrangement of her ‘tyrant’ father, a series of mental breakdowns, one of which resulted in her suicide by drowning. In addition to many autobiographical texts she left us, Woolf sometimes enveloped her own life and experiences in her fiction. That is most evident in her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*.

With such profound and meticulous character portrayal and development in *To the Lighthouse* there is no denying that Virginia Woolf based her characters on people she knew very well, for whom she harboured intense emotions – her own family. The central figure of the novel was supposed to be her father, what her own diary input confirms:

This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mother's; & St. Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in – life, death &c. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished*, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel. (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-84, vol.3: 18-19)

However, readers cannot fail to notice that it was in fact Mrs Ramsay, an echo of Virginia Woolf’s mother, who eventually took the central and most prominent position of the novel. As she worked the emphasis shifted; she was unexpectedly diverted into coming to terms with her

mother, who stands for most readers of the finished novel at the centre of the work (Thickstun 1988: 142). In the true manner of confessional writing, Woolf exploits her medium and through writing about her beloved late mother processes her grief and longing, breathes new life into her, and confesses her eternal love for her.

Julia Stephen died in 1895 when Virginia Woolf was only thirteen years old and became ‘a lingering phantom of femininity and womanhood that would haunt Woolf for much of her life’ (Henry 2016: 4). Her slightly older sister Vanessa ‘testifies to the uncanny accuracy of the portrait she created in *To the Lighthouse* by the play of imagination over memory’ (Thickstun 1988: 142). Reading about her mother in the shape of Mrs Ramsay, Vanessa writes:

you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead...It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms and it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation to have been able to see her in such a way (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 1975-80, vol.3: 572)

Not only are the characters reincarnations of her loved ones, the setting and the titular lighthouse are based on actual places that her family used to visit in her childhood. Set in the Hebrides off the coast of Scotland, *To the Lighthouse*, her most autobiographical novel (Merkin 2004) is based on Woolf’s recollections of idyllic childhood summers spent at Talland House in St Ives on the Cornish coast in the vicinity of a towering lighthouse.

Woolf wrote “I could fill pages remembering one thing after another. All together made the summer at St Ives the best beginning to life conceivable. When they took Talland House father and mother gave us – me at any rate – what has been perennial, invaluable” (*A Sketch of*



*the Past*, 1985: 128). What she called “the seven unhappy years” (*A Sketch of the Past*, 1985: 136) of 1897-1904 made a mark on her life and psyche, so Woolf desired to revisit her pleasant memories of childhood and safety. As mentioned before, Virginia Woolf’s young life was plagued with tragedies. Two years after she lost her darling mother Julia, another mother figure of Virginia’s passed away. It was her stepsister, i.e. Julia’s daughter, and soon after her brother Thoby died. The uncanny resemblance between these three deaths and the deaths in *To the Lighthouse*, those of Mrs Ramsay, her daughter Prue, and son Andrew, does not escape us. Should we surmise that it must have been these exact tragedies that made their way into the fiction? However, the readers must avert from such fallacious biographical assumptions. Brain (2014: 13) cautions that such a way of reading is seriously flawed: if a biography mentions that an author did or thought something, therefore it must be clear that one of their poems or stories replicates that incident or thought. Lest one discusses her autobiography, Woolf as a writer should never be equated with Woolf as a character or narrator. However, confessional writing blurs the boundaries between the real life occurrences and characters and their fictional counterparts. The deaths in *To the Lighthouse* could have been inspired by her own loss and (un)processed grief and might have reflected her own experience. Woolf erects literary monuments for her fallen family members by writing about them, without explicitly writing about them. This was her way of dealing with grief and finding closure; for confessional writing is, as Phillips (1973, as cited in Gill 2014: 7) describes it, ‘therapeutic and/or purgative’.

The characters in the novel are ‘killed off’ in parentheses, against the backdrop of WWI, without any description or sorrow, as time indifferently marches forward. The deaths are seemingly insignificant when compared to the greatness of eternity. Should the readers assume it

would have been too painful to relive those heartbreaks anew? The novel offered her a chance to spend more time with her family, who was taken from her, to tell them what she never could, to relive some memories and to have a proper goodbye. We may assume that *To the Lighthouse* is, to borrow a term from Erica Wagner (cited in Moss 2001, as cited in Gill 2014: 7), ‘heart healing’ and she uses her writing to confess the heartbreak and longing for her late mother and siblings, as well as resolving the trauma related to her father.

In “A Sketch of the Past” she describes the freeing-up process she discovered in fictionally writing out the trauma of losing her parents (McIntire 2008: 165). Her diary entries corroborate her ‘obsession’ with her father and mother: “I was obsessed by them both unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-84, vol.3: 208) so writing about them in *To the Lighthouse* was a therapeutic experience. She ceased to be obsessed by her mother: “I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest” (*A Sketch of the Past*, 1985: 81). Woolf concluded that:

just as I rubbed out a good deal of the force of my mother’s memory by writing about her in *To the Lighthouse*, so I rubbed out much of his [father’s] memory there too. Yet he obsessed me for years. Until I wrote it out, I would find my lips moving; I would be arguing with him; raging against him; saying to myself all that I never said to him (*A Sketch of the Past*, 1985: 108).

Woolf’s intention was not to disclose a true confession of her life story. There is not one mention of the confessional ‘I’, present in confessional works as early as in Augustine’s

*Confessions*, even though it is immensely inspired by her personal life. She poured her heart and emotions into the novel, writing out the traumas that ravaged her and drawing upon her life experience and the obvious central figures in her life, especially her beloved and never-forgotten mother, which are thus commemorated and eternalised.

Nevertheless we ought to be mindful when it comes to reading into Virginia Woolf's prose. The warning Brain (2014) points out in her essay on pitfalls of reading Sylvia Plath biographically can be applied to reading Woolf as well. Perceiving Woolf's fiction, especially *To the Lighthouse* which is amply autobiographical at first glance, as an autobiography can result in a distorted view of Woolf's writing, or even a failure to see what else Woolf wished to convey, what the novel's other takeaways are. Readers can miss Woolf's beliefs, confessions, philosophical ideas, and personal sentiment being too clung on the autobiographical elements of the novel. Finally, we can surmise that *To the Lighthouse* is, in addition to being a memorial for her family and an effort of 'heart healing', a confessional story rooted in but not a mirror of real-life events.

## **2.4 Confessional writing**

Since St Augustine, confessions have predominantly been tied to the Roman Church, as one of the seven sacraments, but the 18<sup>th</sup> century sees the rise in literacy and introspection which allows for confession to spread beyond the confines of the Church. The importance of confession, which started out as a religious practice of individual, and private self-examination to the rise of 'secular individualism' and consequently to the growth of 'a literature of self-exploration' is

undeniable, as Stone (1990, as cited in Gill 2006: 5) points out. Confessional writing has entered the world of literature with authors, from the early Romantic writers to Dostoevsky, Proust, Woolf, and a surge of contemporary writers, unearthing their innermost passions, concerns, and beliefs, and sharing them with wider audiences. By exploring themselves and confessing their minds, novelists and poets paint a literary mirror in which the readers can recognise themselves and empathise. Brooks writes that confession ‘has become in Western culture a crucial mode of self-examination; from the time of the early Romantics to the present day, confession has become a dominant mode of self-expression’ (2001: 9). So we can follow a progression of confession from being a religious asset to one of the most important mode of self-expression in literature.

As the notion of confession breaks from religious confines and penetrates the world of literature, the classic disclosure of sins with the hope of absolution becomes insufficient and inadequate mode of self-expression. When it comes to the form of literary confessions Gill suggests that ‘to think about confession is to abandon conventional and hitherto dependable notions of reliability, authority and authenticity and to embrace, and find new ways of addressing, the difficulty and slipperiness – which is also the fascination – of modern variations of the form’ (2006: 1). Confessional writing presupposes the reliance on the first-person narration, the use of interior monologues and soliloquies, free indirect discourse and the ‘stream of consciousness’ style of writing, all hallmarks of modernist narration.

Confessional writing is what indisputably connects the art of expressing one’s feelings on the written page with the construction of self and identity, and insofar enables the experience of both self-discovery and self-recovery (hooks 1999: 5). Woolf’s confessional writing is an expression of self and her personal memories, traumas, experiences entwined with universal

truths about human relationships. Thus, her fiction is not merely a window to her consciousness, which we are invited to explore through confessions, but it extends beyond her personal world. To confess is to express the complexities and values of the frail human existence.

### ***2.5 A Room of One's Own***

Being a woman, even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, still meant having restricted rights. Women were deprived of education (they only received university degrees in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; women were admitted to degrees at Oxford in 1920, whereas at Cambridge University could not receive their full degrees until 1948) and could not make enough money for their own living or to support their families. Women were still predominantly dependent on their husbands, financially and materially. They belonged to separate spheres, for men were privileged to participate in the public sphere, which included work, law, politics, whereas women were relegated to the domestic sphere. They were expected to be submissive to their husbands and care for the household and children, or rather continue the Victorian feminine ideal of 'The Angel in the House'. With time, that ideal has become obsolete and demeaning, it even had derogatory connotations attached to it, and it had an ardent critic in Virginia Woolf.

Woolf believed that the strength of that cultural myth, perpetuated and internalised by women themselves, was a more subtle yet no less formidable impediment to women's self-expression than their lack of financial independence (Parsons 2007). It was also one of the main

obstacles she had to overcome in order to become a writer. To kill the angel of the house, Woolf declared, was crucial to the profession of a woman writer:

Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women. (*Women and Writing*, 1979: 59)

Even symbolically, Virginia Woolf decides to kill off the 'Angel of the House' in her novels. Mrs Ramsay, the perfect hostess, in *To the Lighthouse* passes away in the course of the novel and vacates a spot for Lily Briscoe, an aspiring artist with progressive views, whereas Mrs Dalloway in the eponymous novel will relinquish her role to the more modern and emancipated daughter Elizabeth. The role and impediments of the Angel of the House are further explored in the pioneering text of twentieth-century feminist literary criticism, *A Room of One's Own*.

*A Room of One's Own* (1929), a book-long feminist essay that started as a series of lectures to women audiences, is possibly the first manifesto of modern feminist consciousness, with semi-autobiographical and confessional elements aplenty. It explores the themes like relations between men and women and the status of women in history and literature, but it delves into 'the relation of women and fiction, and in particular the social and ideological conditions that have impeded women from writing' (Parsons 2007).

The structure of the essay is reminiscent of a novel in which she fictionalises some of her own experiences and inserts herself, albeit a fictionalised version, as a protagonist. The essay

does not escape from personal reflections and excursions to the past, so frequently employed in her previous ‘stream of consciousness’ novels (*Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*). Even though she assumes different guises (Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael), the first-person narration, one of the hallmarks of confessional writing, is widely present:

BUT, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one’s own? I will try to explain. When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant (Woolf, [1929] 1989: 3).

The first-person narration may lead us to believe that the teacher/narrator in question is indeed Virginia Woolf herself, retelling her own experiences, but as pointed out before Brain (2014) warns about flaws in such an (auto)biographical approach to reading. One should not make fallacious assumptions on the basis of authors’ biographies. Woolf was asked to give two lectures at the two women’s colleges of Cambridge University, which must have inspired and prompted her to expand and fictionalise these lectures. The result was this feminist confessional essay in which she elaborates on the findings of her research and expresses her concerns regarding the inferiority of women’s positions in both history and literature.

Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. [...] Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping (Woolf, [1929] 1989: 4-5)

She was appalled by the discovery of women being their husbands' 'possessions', mostly illiterate and un(der)educated, and as such could not stand out or express themselves, let alone write, fiction or anything. 'The demands of the domestic household, the laws that denied married women ownership of funds or property, and a lack of educational opportunity, made it almost impossible for a woman before the nineteenth century to take up writing as a profession. Writing requires time, privacy and literacy, and women suffered from too little of all of these things' (Parsons 2007: 82).

Writing, or more specifically the lack thereof, as a means of construction of self and identity, which bells hooks (1999) asserts, contributes to the oppression of women. Woolf singles out 'the absence of financial resources as well as a woman's literary tradition to fall back on' (Lin 2016) and the lack of both intellectual freedom and freedom of the spirit as main culprits for women's inferiority, in society and literature. The women writer stands out as an anomaly in patriarchal society where her talent is not acknowledged (Lin 2016).

The takeaway of this polemic is materialistic: 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (Woolf, [1929] 1989: 4). Women need a room of their own, which is an oasis of peace where literary opera of women could arise from, and financial independence. 'Five hundred pounds a year [...] was the amount of money required for a woman in the early twentieth century to have the financial independence that would allow her to free herself from the expected cultural role of the Angel of the House. If a woman could make that money herself, through her own pen, then she could begin to write as she wished, in her own voice' (Parsons 2007: 87). Financial independence was crucial, but often unreachable, for emancipation and freedom from the patriarchal ensnarement.



### **3. *Mrs Dalloway***

Published in 1925, *Mrs Dalloway* is Virginia Woolf's first completely successful modernist novel, 'overwhelmingly packed with minds, memories, names, ghosts, people of all classes, eating and marrying, living and dying, soldiering, doctoring, having impressions, sane and insane, all amid the dense turmoil of central London's shops, streets, parks, and things, things, things, – frocks, gloves, hats, macintoshes, umbrellas, breadknives, bodies, planes, cars, vans' (Cunnigham 2000). It delivers a woman's whole life, but in a single day. The novel comprises a series of the past and present experiences told or thought by main and episodic characters cleverly bound by the 'stream of consciousness' style of writing and sporadically interrupted by the stern sounds of the clock reminding them of the passage of time. Effortless transitions between past and present experiences or interior and exterior worlds, smooth perspective shifts, intimate confessions, exploration of various characters' consciousness on an ordinary day make this novel one of the arguably greatest modernist works.

#### **3.1 '*Moments of being*': subjective perception of time**

Woolf's modernism was characterised by 'stream of consciousness' writing, formal innovation, exploration of human consciousness, and temporal experimentation. That time is at the centre of Woolf's oeuvre was early recognized; it was a mark of its modernism (Banfield 2003: 473). The distinction between 'time on the clock' and 'time in the mind', or the *temps* and

*durée* of Bergson's philosophy, emerges as one of the central notions and vehicles for character development in Woolf's prose.

Time being one of the most significant aspects of the work of Virginia Woolf, it should be able to trace her development as a novelist in terms of her gradual swing from a traditional view of time to Bergson's *durée* (Kumar 1962: 71). Her first two novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), used a more traditional form and techniques, whereas in *Jacob's Room* (1922) Woolf embraces an experimental style in describing a string of scenes from Jacob's life and thus heralds modernism and temporal experiments, evoking the flux of life, in her fiction. *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) that followed demonstrated Woolf's capacity of exploring subjective and internalised time and durations of her characters. Even though her later novels rely on the subjective perception of time and characters' durations, Virginia Woolf does not abandon 'time on the clock' but rather juxtaposes durations and perceptions of her protagonists with 'actual time'.

*Mrs Dalloway* is formally structured by the motif of the passing hours of the day, set in this case by the standard of Big Ben (Parsons 2007: 114). '*There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air*' (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 2). Parsons (2007) further observes that such a structure is actually undercut for Big Ben's '*leaden circles dissolving in the air*' both expose the arbitrariness of the standardisation of time and emphasise the inability of an hour on the clock to mark the experience of 'duration' in the mind.

Big Ben, which almost functions as a separate character in the novel, dictates time and sets the temporal frame in *Mrs Dalloway*. The recurring sentence ‘*The leaden circles dissolved in the air*’, referring to the passing hours demarcated by the bell sounds reaching everyone in the vicinity, appears all the way through the novel reminding the characters of the relentless passages of time and oftentimes bringing them to the present moment from the myriad of impressions and recollections that comprise their subjective perception of time. The ceaseless striking of the hours conveys life’s briefness and fleetingness. Big Ben thus reminds Clarissa, Peter, Septimus and the rest of the cast of the external world, outer reality, that one beyond the confines of their thoughts.

The events in *Mrs Dalloway* take place during one day in June. Yet the novel offers much more than a day in life of Clarissa Dalloway as Woolf delves into the minds of the characters. We are presented with Clarissa’s mental and emotional state as we explore her history evoked by certain people and places she encounters and visits that day. As Woolf herself noted in one of her essays, ‘[to] tell the whole story of a life’ she needed to ‘devise some means by which the two levels of action can be recorded – the rapid passage of events and actions; the slow opening up of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotion’ (*Collected Essays*, 1966-7, vol. 4: 6).

In *Time and Free Will* Bergson explored the idea of conceptualising the self not only through external perceptions of others and internal perceptions of oneself but also via decisive and formative moments in our lives which one can reach only through memories. Such deeply intense moments belong to our durations and are available if we ‘carry ourselves back in thought to those moments of our lives when we made some serious decision, moments unique of their kind, which will never be repeated’ (Bergson 2001, as cited in Parsons 2007: 74). Woolf was influenced by Bergson’s viewpoints and makes use of them in *Mrs Dalloway*. Clarissa’s

memories take her from the present-day London back to Bourton when she was a young girl, who experienced “*the most exquisite moment of her whole life [...] she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up*”, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious” (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 30) when kissed by Sally Seton, and who also rejected the marriage proposal from Peter Walsh only to marry into a more stable but dull life with Richard Dalloway. It was a method for recovering and articulating such moments of being, as she called them, that Woolf developed in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), describing it as her ‘tunnelling process’ (Parsons 2007: 74). On the ‘tunnelling process’ Woolf expands in her diary (*A Writer’s Diary*, 1953: 60):

I should say a good deal about *The Hours* [*Mrs Dalloway*] and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment.

These moments of heightened consciousness, which Woolf referred to as ‘moments of being’, ‘delineate most ponderous traces of the past’ (McIntire 2008: 166) but they do not merely allow characters to revisit their past experiences and memories. Woolf refers to ‘moments of being’ as exceptional moments of emotion, qualitative states of heightened intensity or shock (Parsons 2007: 75). These are moments when an individual is completely imbued in their experiences, completely aware of them, and can grasp the sense of reality, which is elusive most of the time.

The smell and sight of the flowers in Miss Pym's flower shop allow for Clarissa an intimate 'moment of being' of her savouring the beauty of the present moment, in which images and sensations follow one after another:

*how fresh like frilled linen clean from a laundry laid in wicker trays the roses looked; and dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale—as if it were the evening and girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer's day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations its arum lilies was over; and it was the moment between six and seven when every flower—roses, carnations, irises, lilac—glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 10)*

Such intense moments of being cannot be easily transformed into words or even understood as opposed to felt, but Woolf's modernist fiction effortlessly manages to achieve this transformation: 'capturing that elusive element of life' (Parsons 2007: 75), or 'making a scene come right; making a character come together' (*Moments of Being*, 1985). Woolf insinuates that underlying reality is actually experienced within these moments, or rather our subjective perception of time, devoid of order and patterns of 'actual time'. The real is the interior—and the interior may be the past, the future or the present (Duran 2004: 307). Our interior worlds and perceptions govern our conceptualisation of time and real.

*Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying 'that is all' more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, that is all. Fear no more says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows and*

*renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking, the dog barking, far away barking and barking.*

*'Heavens, the front-door bell!' exclaimed Clarissa, staying her needle. Roused, she listened* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 33-34)

The front door bell snaps Clarissa out of daydreaming and reminiscing. It brings her back to the present time. Sounds, bells, clocks, alarms evoke real time, which stands in stark contrast to durations of Clarissa and other characters. In this passage Virginia Woolf does not simply retell all that is going on in the mind of Clarissa Dalloway. She tries to convey everything Clarissa is experiencing, thinking, feeling, hearing, yearning. Thoughts, images, associations appear on the page as something triggers them in Clarissa's mind, seemingly unstoppable and one after another. Woolf manages to convey the smallest movements of thoughts, sensation, and everyday life (Hägglund 2012: 56). In other words she is translating Clarissa's 'moment of being' into words as authentically as the written words allow. That is her 'tunnelling process', which requires an impersonal third-person voice that is separate from that of Clarissa's immediate subjective perceptions, with the role of evoking for the reader the quality of her experience unavailable to her own conscious awareness (Parsons 2007: 76) because her experiences, that is, all of our experiences are unavailable to our own consciousness.

To present her characters' innermost and intimate thoughts Woolf employs free indirect discourse. Free indirect discourse, according to Genette (1980), is a technique for presenting a character's thoughts or speech without obvious mediation by an external narrator. Such a way of representing the subjective consciousness of one or more characters with no external commentary is perhaps the most immediately distinguishing technique of the modernist novel (Parsons 2007).

Throughout the novel, we observe from multiple characters' perspectives and sometimes we even transition from one character's point of view to another one's in the same passage. And this is how Virginia Woolf develops her characters. Not through physical appearance, social status, and their actions anymore, but through their external observations and internal perceptions of others, through their consciousness and recollections explored by the 'tunnelling process', through their own internal consciousness, replete with memories and associations, which we can find similar to Bergson's duration, which naturally means that they do not occur in real or clock time.

Woolf does not employ 'moments of being' only to communicate with the past. The memories characters revisit and moments that transfix them, along with the meaning they attach to them, provide a deep insight into their character, which attests to Woolf utilising 'moments of being' a means of characterisation.

Oftentimes we encounter multiple characters' perceptions and streams of consciousness in the same passage. Parsons (2007: 76) observes that such 'interconnections are framed by a shared occurrence'. For instance, when a motor car stops near the flower shop Clarissa visited, the narrative moves from one character to another as we read various interpretations as to who is the furtive figure behind the dove-grey upholstery. When an onlooker looks up into the sky and spots an advertising aeroplane flying above London, we are given the interwoven perspectives and ruminations of a handful of characters, generating a collective consciousness, trying to guess what the smoke-advertised letters stand for, which is yet another example of Genette's multiple internal focalisation.

It is the chiming of Big Ben, which also functions as a stern reminder of the passage of actual time, that shifts perspective from one character to another and connects otherwise unrelated characters. As someone's thought process was abruptly by the clock's sounds, the same chimes transport us to the mind of someone else. The multitude of perspectives are connected internally as well through 'patterns of common and recurring mental images and phrases that serve to link even characters who never meet, such as Clarissa and the shell-shocked Septimus Smith' (Parsons 2007: 76).

### **3.2 Experiencing life: past vs present moments**

The entirety of the plot of *Mrs Dalloway* takes place in less than 24 hours; however, only a glimpse into their lives is more than enough for the readers to get to know all the protagonists, with their fears, aspirations, regrets, and to form a deeper connection with them. The readers are introduced to the characters on a June day in London, but they are fleshed out with much more than just a day's experiences. Virginia Woolf captures their ruminations and feelings and immerses them in their respective pasts as they reflect on the opportunities they have taken and the decisions they have or have not made. Such a modernist take on narration allowed Woolf to verbalise the essence of life for reading *Mrs Dalloway* feels like reading the minds of the characters as their memories intrude upon their thoughts or as their perceptions of others shift and change while they are interacting with them. Virginia Woolf's words, Duffy (2000) observed, make up the language of what life *feels* like.



Even though the novel was written nearly a century ago, the interactive and experiential reality has remained the same. Human beings have been feeling, thinking, communicating, experiencing this way even many years ago, which testifies to the modernity and relevancy of Woolf's fiction.

The readers can understand the motivation behind the actions of Clarissa Dalloway or Peter Walsh, pathos of Septimus' war trauma, abandonment and isolation in Rezia's mind, and can connect with them on a deeper, more personal level because through their thoughts and recollections we perceive so much more than what occurred during the selected day in June. Their past and present experiences blend in an explosion of thoughts and emotions which constitute our complex interior worlds. Woolf employs strategies of the 'stream of consciousness' style of writing to penetrate their innermost and private thoughts, which are all available for us to read, not only so we could learn more about them but to makes us feel exactly how they feel.

From the opening lines of the novel we follow Mrs Dalloway as she is making preparation for the party she is to give later that evening. She leaves her home in the morning to buy the flowers and as she walks through the streets of London, her interior world begins to unravel before us. Being the central character of the novel and the one whose interior world we explore the most, it comes as no wonder that Clarissa is intensely receptive to the 'moments of being'. On her way to the flower shop she walks through the busy and alive London streets, deeply experiencing felt moments:

*In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high*

*singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 2)

Intrusions of such revelatory and intimate moments like the above excerpted one occur every so often and are by no means exclusively related to significant moments or grand events but occur during ordinary and mundane acts, like walking through London or smelling the flowers. It goes to show that Clarissa's 'moments of being' are moments of her heightened awareness triggered by a certain sensation or a thought. 'Woolf's "moments of being" occur when one receives an emotional blow analogous to a physical "shock" that disrupts the ordinary flow of perception. This "shock" pierces through the "cotton wool" of everyday "non-being" (*A Sketch of the Past*, 1985: 72) to offer a brief moment of illumination in which we are suddenly conscious of our ontology [...]: a moment in which we know that we are' (McIntire 2008: 167).

Clarissa is fifty-two years old: '*The candle was half burnt down*' (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 26) and in that age she has adequate emotional depth and maturity to contemplate her life, ageing, and the inevitability and fear of death. Fear of death, accompanied with her sense of inadequacy and alienation from the society she inhabits intrude Clarissa's thoughts throughout the novel. Woolf's confessional writing is the best and most delicate way to articulate Clarissa's deepest, innermost thoughts and fears:

*She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged [...] She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day [...] what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab. Did it matter then, she asked herself walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that*

*somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 5-6).

Despite being aware of dangers of living another day, Clarissa accepts the fact that no life is eternal, death is imminent, but in that very moment she was there, in the midst of vibrant London rumble, and knows she must appreciate being alive. Mrs Dalloway fears death but she is daunted by oblivion as well. After she is gone, she fears there will be nothing left of her that will be remembered. She does not want to be forgotten but wishes to be important to someone and persist in their memories, thus allaying her grand fear of death. Clarissa and Peter live on in each other. However, by ‘living on in something else or someone else, [Clarissa] can be said to resist the separation in time, but by the same token she is at the mercy of an other who may forget, distort, or erase the memory of herself’ (Hägglund 2012: 67). Peter does have Clarissa in his memories and thoughts, consciously or subconsciously, but he clings to his memory of Clarissa ‘in a self-destructive way’ (Hägglund 2012: 68) holding out hope and not being able to let go of their past, perpetuating the concept of Bergson’s *la durée*, or accept her choices made years ago, resulting in his failed marriage.

Peter’s arrival triggers in Clarissa Dalloway both vivid memories of the past and intense responses to the present (Duffy 2000). His arrival at Clarissa’s awakens their dormant feelings for each other and reintroduces the passion she had for him into her heart, along with which came regrets. Clarissa’s present is affected by the choices she made in her past, namely choosing

Richard and the stable upper-class life over true affection and passion she felt when being with Peter or kissing the brazen and impulsive Sally. Her mind is haunted by the choice she regrets making and by those she could not make.

The uncomfortable conversation that ensues between them sees external dialogue entwined with their internal remarks and impressions of each other, and excursions into the past. Their past memories and desires intrude upon present experience. The readers get both Clarissa and Peter's point of view and get to know how they really feel about each other, that is, what they miss, regret, or want.

*"I often wish I'd got on better with your father," he said. "But he never liked any one who—our friends," said Clarissa; and could have bitten her tongue for thus reminding Peter that he had wanted to marry her. Of course I did, thought Peter; it almost broke my heart too, he thought; and was overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked at from a terrace, ghastly beautiful with light from the sunken day. I was more unhappy than I've ever been since, he thought. And as if in truth he were sitting there on the terrace he edged a little towards Clarissa; put his hand out; raised it; let it fall. There above them it hung, that moon. She too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace, in the moonlight"* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 36)

Excursions into the past do not always bring comfort and relief, but rather torment. Peter's visit to Clarissa brought to the forefront of his mind his underlying feelings which held him prisoner for years, as well as her rejection of his proposal. *"For why go back like this to the past? he thought. Why make him think of it again? Why make him suffer, when she had tortured him so infernally? Why?"* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 36). Peter's haunting past catches up to his present in which he is bluntly reminded of a life he has always desired but cannot have. Upon seeing Elizabeth, Clarissa and Richard's daughter: *"Here is my Elizabeth!"* (Woolf, [1925] 2016:

41, original emphasis), a daughter that could have been his, what Clarissa's use of possessive determiner underlines, he escapes from Clarissa and symbolically continues his agonising run from his past.

Peter was not the sole instigator of her ruminations and reflections. On her walk Clarissa met Hugh Whitbread, who symbolizes the upper-class socialite life she and her husband belong to. Peter Walsh, an outcast of such a society, used to tease Clarissa she would marry into the upper-class life. Her chance meeting with Hugh reminded her of the reality she was living, i.e. of Peter's prophecy, so her past begins to unravel as she questions the choices she had made that led her to her present life. In one of the most personal and confessional passages of the novel, Clarissa Dalloway questions her own identity, as the marriage to Richard led her to being Mrs Dalloway as opposed to Clarissa:

*She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 8).*

Clarissa's societal role consumed her identity and people do not acknowledge her as an individual: she is not Clarissa anymore, but Richard's wife, Mrs Dalloway. She has become devoid of individuality. Woolf cleverly introduces the idea of deconstruction of identity. The self is not a stable construct but is established through our relations and interactions with others and it relies on our self-presentation and self-realisation. Woolf's fiction demonstrates that identity is composed of memories and perceptions, which allude to Freudian ideas of the self.

### 3.3 'A certain silence': Trauma

Harrowing tragedies like the World War or sudden yet unimaginable events as is losing a friend or a family member are traumatic experiences that tend to shape a person and change their mental image completely. Oftentimes enveloped in grief and helplessness, one's selfhood lessens and continues with life not by living but surviving. One of the prevalent themes in *Mrs Dalloway* is exploration of trauma. The day in life of Clarissa Dalloway, which the novel details, occurs after the First World War; however, its memory and ghosts still loom in the minds of the novel's protagonists.

Trauma is something private and it lingers in our consciousness, sometimes even unbeknownst to us. Confessions, both to ourselves and others, are a way of coping and resolving the deep, personal wounds. Woolf's confessional prose unearths them and demonstrates the effects of trauma on our innermost selves, personas we show to the world and those around us.

Despite being over, the War and its aftermath still resonate with the society:

*The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven—over* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 2)

All the characters in the novel are affected by the war, more overtly or less; for instance, car back-firing noise mistaken for the sound of a pistol or an aeroplane skywriting an advertisement for what seems to be toffee are ominous reminders of the recently ended war.

However, the most impacted character is Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked veteran, whose life is haunted by the psychological scars of war and the death of his fallen soldier friend Evans.

As in many soldiers, Septimus' trauma begins tormenting him after he has returned home. *"He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference"* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 76). The war needed him emotionally detached and suppressing his own individuality and needs. During the war he fought bravely and emotionlessly: *"...when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that there was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably"* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 76). His idea of courage, instilled by the training of soldiers, was not to display any sign of emotion. That is why when we are introduced to his character, his guilt and a surplus of suppressed emotions and memories have taken their toll on him and are now intruding incessantly upon his mind. Given the magnitude of Septimus's experiences during the war, he can only process them in retrospect, and the repetition of the traumatic past is a way of working through what happened as well as the guilt of having survived (Hägglund 2012: 69).

He is unable to deal with mourning on his own and is furthermore deprived of adequate professional help for physicians and psychiatrists his wife Rezia enlists do not seem to recognise deferred effects of shell shock, that is, his engulfing trauma. Septimus' tragic past coexists with his broken present in duration and as a reason he hallucinates and communicates with his deceased friend Evans, imagines dogs being turned to men, believes an advertising aeroplane is sending him messages, etc., all of which strongly concerns his wife. Rezia left her homeland for her husband, who, she fears, is descending into madness and losing touch with reality. 'The

refusal to mourn may not be destructive only for others', looking at Rezia, who was all alone in an alien country worrying for her husband, 'but also for the self' (Hägglund 2012: 70). "*Sir [William Bradshaw] said he never spoke of 'madness': he called it not having a sense of proportion*" (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 85). No help could have been provided for Septimus, who was not only ensnared in his trauma but also 'in a society that wants to move on and forget about the war' (Hägglund 2012: 69). Because they wanted to distance themselves as far away from the lingering memory of the war, medical establishment misconstrued Septimus' trauma as something more benign, which proved to be fatal. What is even more dangerous than living with trauma is not recognising and/or treating it. Virginia Woolf warns about it through Septimus' fate, remembering with horror her own experiences with doctors. Septimus is the character Woolf used to confess her own mental problems: his feelings that messages were being sent to him, feelings of worthlessness and uneasiness, 'hallucinations and suicidalism mirror her own times of mental disturbance' (Cunningham 2000).

Septimus' complete broken interior mental world is open for the readers; Woolf gives ample insight into it and presents his internal struggles and confessions, like him not being able to forgive himself for Evans' death. He was never able to cope or resolve his guilt from the war but becomes, as Hägglund (2012: 70) points out, 'locked in a repetition of traumatic events that will lead him to take his own life'.

When the news of Septimus', or rather a young man's, death reaches Clarissa Dalloway, she cannot but feel such news ("*Somehow it was her disaster — her disgrace*" (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 164) are trespassing at her party ("*Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought*" (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 162), but afterwards she starts to empathise with her



literary double. She retreats to a solitary room and it is then that Woolf, in a most poetic language, delivers Clarissa's most intimate confessions regarding her fears, doubts and persistence. That is a 'moment of being' for Clarissa when her interior world floods with questions, confessions, concerns.

Septimus' death was the catalyst for Clarissa's mental and emotional clarity. A line from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* ("Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages") echoes repeatedly in the minds of both Septimus and Clarissa during the day and it reinforces their concerns about death. Hillis Miller (as cited in Hägglund 2012: 73) holds that the lines indicate that one 'will reach peace and escape from suffering only in death'. Throughout the novel Clarissa feared death and now that it intruded her party, she is coming to terms with it. She construes Septimus' death as an attempt to communicate, to express what he could not when he was alive, and sees serenity and peace (an embrace) in it:

*Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death* (Woolf, [1925] 2016: 163)

She spends her day ruminating about her past, which she cannot let go. The ghosts of her past choices: Richard over Peter, stability and status over passion and love, continue to haunt her just as Evans was there for Septimus. We can surmise that both of them are immersed in their respective durations. Septimus, however, escapes the terrors of living his tormented life by plunging himself through the window while Clarissa decides to accept the choices she has made and make the most of her life.

She found a new appreciation for life and its ensuing surprises, and will embrace life as Septimus embraced death. Shakespeare's *Othello*' remark: "If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy" sneaks in Clarissa's mind once again, the first time was in Bourton when she was to meet Sally, but this time it has a completely different meaning.

#### ***4. To the Lighthouse***

Highly anticipated and praised upon release, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is Woolf's most autobiographical and most experimental novel. She was dissatisfied with the constraints of the novel as a form so she pursued a new form with *To the Lighthouse*, describing it as "a new—by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-84, vol.3: 34). Her choice of the term "elegy" captures the persistent theme of mourning in her works, as well as Woolf's bereavement of her own creations (Ellmann 2010).

She confided to her diary (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-84, vol.3: 118): "I am now and then haunted by some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past...". That woman came into being as Mrs Ramsay, an ideal of femininity and beauty and homage to her late mother. Mrs Ramsay, the catalyst for Lily Briscoe's artistic expression and a point in the Oedipal triangle of resentment between her unrelenting husband and jealous son, is the central character of the novel.

Woolf's approach to time in *To the Lighthouse* is incomparable. The opening and the closing sections of the novel each detail a single day in the life of a family and friends

vacationing at an island summer house, whereas the middle section spans ten years and encapsulates human suffering entwined with relentless passage of time.

Tackling themes like artistic ambition, love and loss, emotional development, Woolf's poetic and philosophical 'stream of consciousness' novel penetrates deep into its characters' thoughts and unravels their interior personal worlds.

#### **4.1 '*Life stand still*': subjective perception of time**

The very opening of the novel introduces the issue of subjective temporal perception. The promise to go to the lighthouse conveyed a tremendous joy to six-year-old James because that idea had been boiling in his mind; however, that idea had not been in his mind more than a few days, but an excited child's perception of time differs from that of an indifferent child or especially an adult. The lack of ability to conceptualise 'actual time' in combination with the excitement makes the wait seem much longer. Days he waited for his goal appear to him to be years: "*he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 9). Woolf expresses his sense of waiting much longer with deliberate precision. Furthermore, the opening section has young James already projected forward, as Duran (2004) points out, so intently to the trip that everything else for him seems unreal. Woolf reiterates the possibility, introduced in *Mrs Dalloway*, that our subjective conception of time – experienced as opposed to physical time is in fact what is real.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf plays with time in a way that allows for a development of the internally-sensed structure of time on the parts of the various characters (Duran 2004: 301). Each character in the novel internalises time differently and experiences it with their respective frame of reference: dwelling on the past, past and present intermingling, or projecting forward in the future.

The modernist representation of time owes much to philosophical understanding of that notion. Banfield (2003) proposes that Woolf was not solely inspired by Bergson's theories but that she adopted G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell's realism, and their dual conception of time. The moment is contained and given a form in order to be placed in the series of immobilized moments [...] For the impressions that make up the moment and the random configuration they assume can only be seized with the clarity required from a position outside experienced time (Banfield 2003: 491). She believes moments are contained and then given some sort of a form, that is, structure, so they could be placed one after another, in a series of immobilised moments. That is how she believes time should be perceived: 'Time passes not as *durée* but as a series of still moments' (Banfield 2003: 471). Moreover, we can perceive it only from the outside, or rather we can experience those moments not before they have passed.

Virginia Woolf tackled the issue of temporality in a hitherto unseen way, according to Banfield (2003), so as to preserve stillness of 'being of the moment', which is actually an attempt at eternalising the fleeting, passing moments in our lives. In other words, that was her way of making them last forever. Her stories then become comprised of crystallised moments. The way 'one stable moment vanquishes chaos' is achieved via a process Woolf calls 'crystallization', a term which Leslie Stephen (1876) had invoked for the history of ideas, speaking of 'a

crystallisation round a new framework of theory' (Banfield 2003: 492). Woolf adopts the metaphor of crystallisation for the process by which something enduring is made out of the moment's impressions (Banfield 2003: 492-493).

Hägglund (2012) takes on a different approach. As Banfield's demonstration of Woolf's aesthetic of the moment cannot but underline the radical temporality of life, Hägglund sets out to demonstrate how Virginia Woolf's characters experience those passing moments, i.e. they live in the moment, whereas Woolf does not strive for solely eternalising the ephemeral, fleeting moments, but she captures and writes about the beauty of those moments. The moment can only be given as a moment by passing away, and it is the passing away of the moment that induces the passion for it (Hägglund 2012: 17).

The following passage exemplifies Woolf's crystallisation and depicts a scene in which Mrs Ramsay observes her family and friends at a dinner party:

*Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness (she was helping William Bankes to one very small piece more, and peered into the depths of the earthenware pot) seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she*

*had had once today, already, of peace, of rest.* Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 157-158, original emphases).

Woolf delivers Mrs Ramsay's 'moment of being' by means of free indirect discourse which uncovers her introspective perception of time. She is aware this moment will not last and wants to preserve every particle of it. Mrs Ramsay struggles with the idea of transience, eternity, of moments – life passing by. She sees the key to confronting this ephemerality in surrounding herself and engaging with people; more specifically, by maintaining social relationships (Hägglund 2012), and the dinner party scene is a prime example of her bringing people together. So as they all were distracted by trivialities like talking about boots, and eating, her stream of consciousness unearths her internalisation of time and her innermost thoughts of ravages of time and beauty of endurance, displaying Woolf's lyrical prowess. Her efforts to undo the fleetingness are presented and this is exactly what reflects Banfield's concept of crystallised moments. But upon closer reading the readers realise what Woolf writes about: the beauty of the moment is in its transience. Memories only can preserve precious moments, which in a way contradicts Banfield's notion of crystallisation.

Hägglund (2012) points out that the temporal marker 'Just now' is used twice to emphasise the moment's fleetingness. Woolf here draws attention to Mrs Ramsay's present and her awareness that her present will imminently become her past: "*but this cannot last*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 157). The moment she is observing will belong to that past. It cannot and will not last. Mrs Ramsay's ruminations upon leaving the dinner table underline the ephemerality of moments, which can last only in memories or durations.

*With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 167-168).

Hägglund (2012: 15) also delineates the problem of succession indicating that the moment comes into being *at the same time* as it ceases to be. As soon as something crystallises enough for us to understand it, it has already ceased to exist in the present moment and belongs to the past. Unlike Bergson's prolonged state of duration, the very inception of a moment signifies its passing. To keep them alive we transform moments into memories, merely changing their form. The moment has passed, but is not lost. From the present point of view it belongs to the past. Woolf's characters tend to hold on firmly to their memories, which oftentimes comes to the surface in their ruminations and 'moments of being' intermingling their past and present and resulting in a collage of their experiences.

Mrs Ramsay's attempt at eternalising life lies with what she calls "*merging and flowing and creating*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 126) of social relationships, while Lily Briscoe's preferred medium is art. She resists the fleetingness of moments and strives "*to make of the moment something permanent*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 237) by capturing the present on a canvas, i.e. via painting, as Mrs Ramsay's proclamation "*Life stand still here*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 236) repeatedly echoes in her mind. Lily's metaphor of a somnolent traveller on a train demonstrates that we have but once chance to behold what is before us, to notice the present moment before it disappears forever.

*[...] happening for the first time, perhaps for the last time, as a traveller, even though he is half asleep, knows, looking out of the train window, that he must look now, for he will never see that town, or that mule-cart, or that woman at work in the fields, again (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 284).*

Mrs Ramsay observed and eternalised that moment during the dinner as a memory. What Mrs Ramsay is passionate about is not endurance as eternal being but endurance as living on in time (Hägglund 2012: 60). She believes their memoirs and recollections will endure the passing of time and will last as long as they live: they will be their eternity, or their duration.

Mrs Ramsay's long internal reflections during the dinner party are juxtaposed with the children's sense of being-caught-in-the-moment (Duran 2004: 304). As we grow older our cognitive, sensory, and emotional development allow us to have more agency with regard to temporal perception, as opposed to being overwhelmed with the present. Children are developing the capacity for thoughtfulness and intellectual motion, characteristic for adults, and are also capable of being completely absorbed in the moment in that way that makes, as Duran (2004) puts it, the transitory impressions of the moment more real.

Upon entering the room, Mrs Ramsay finds her youngest children wide awake, unable to compromise on a pig's skull, whose shadows, thrown by a nightlight James could not sleep without, tormented Cam's dreams. Mrs Ramsay's ruminations about the ephemerality of moments and realness of life during the meal stand in stark contrast to a single moment her children found themselves in. The shadows cast by the pig's skull constitute, for them, the only reality at that particular moment (Duran 2004: 305).



What follows that scene, or rather that night, is ‘Time Passes’, the middle section of the novel, or a corridor between the opening and closing sections, for Virginia Woolf commented herself that she envisaged *To the Lighthouse* as ‘two blocks joined by a corridor’. The first and third parts of the novel form the torn halves of a single odyssey (Ellmann 2010: 91), whose tear is represented by a section – ‘corridor’ through which time passes in an unsuspected way. ‘Time Passes’ is highly philosophical, experimental and represents, according to Duran (2004), a breakthrough in literary technique. The passage of time has a status all its own, above and beyond our awareness of it (Duran, 2004, p.305).

*The house was left; the house was deserted. It was left like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it. The long night seemed to have set in; the trifling airs, nibbling, the clammy breaths, fumbling, seemed to have triumphed. The saucepan had rusted and the mat decayed. Toads had nosed their way in. Idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro. A thistle thrust itself between the tiles in the larder. The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw; the plaster fell in shovelfuls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 204-205)*

All the characters we were introduced to in the first section are swept away and the summer house enveloped left to the mercy of time takes the spotlight. Gillian Beer (1988: 88) writes, ‘Virginia Woolf faces the problem of how we describe a house when it exists ‘independently of our perception of it.’ The answer in ‘Time Passes’ is to see the object through time, and to use a discourse which points to human absence’. The human experience is evidently omitted, while destructive forces of nature and ravages of time reign in the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*. The deteriorated state of the summer house shows the impact of time on human

doing. Mrs McNab and the help appear once the war has finished to attempt to undo time and nature's destructive work and get the summer house back in order for the family.

#### **4.2 'Moment of intimacy': exploring the characters**

The plot of *To the Lighthouse* is severely reduced and beyond simple. In her novels Woolf wanted to achieve 'a minimalist antinarrative continuity reduced to the skeleton of logical relations' (Banfield 2003: 499). Narration follows the characters as the perspective moves from one character to another bound by their streams of thoughts. The separation into three sections, or rather two sections connected by a corridor, which in itself is an explosion of lyrical and temporal ingenuity, allows us to witness the failed attempt to visit the titular lighthouse during the opening section and the realisation of the coveted trip years later in the closing section.

What Woolf does in *To the Lighthouse*, as well as in her other fictions, is fronting the characters and building the story around them, and what is more, she penetrates their interior and personal worlds to unearth their innermost thoughts, feelings, ambitions, insecurities. As a result of her 'tunnelling process' of characterisation we are directly introduced to the intimate persona of the characters whose interior consciousness are available for us to examine. We can see both their exterior persona and self-presentation to other characters juxtaposed with who they truly are, devoid of any perceptual obstructions. They are exposed and vulnerable, we can look deep into their psychology and that is what makes them relatable and very real.

In its inception this novel was to be an exploration of her father and an outlet for her unresolved feelings towards him, but the character of Mrs Ramsey, based on her mother, began to steal the prominence and emerged as the central most layered character of the novel. Woolf was even worried that she relied too much on her personal experience and that her characters were too close to their real-life counterparts, so she confesses with one of her diary entries that she “felt rather queer, to think how much of this [her parents] there is in *To the Lighthouse* [*sic*], & how all these people will read it & recognise poor Leslie Stephen & beautiful Mrs Stephen in it” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-84, vol.3: 61).

Mrs Ramsay is a devoted wife and a loving mother of eight children. Kindness, sympathy and selflessness emanate from her character and she appears to be an object of appreciation and admiration. Unlike her husband, absorbed in his world of philosophy and ratio, she is present for her family and observant of their needs, looking after them with great care. She represents everything that is feminine, a model of beauty and fertility contrasted with the bone-dry sterility of her husband (Blotner 1956, as cited in Henry 2016: 4). The first section introduces us to Mrs Ramsay both immediately and intermediately. We are presented with her streams of consciousness and confessions, but we also get to know her through other characters’ impressions and memoirs, which is much more evident in the final section. Mrs Ramsay is thus composed of a collection of impressions and recollections.

Mr Ramsay, based off Woolf’s father, is a renowned metaphysician, who, despite his contributions, relies on his wife’s praise and sympathy. His thoughts are riddled with doubts and self-deprecation:

*Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q –R – [...] In that flash of darkness he heard people saying – he was a failure – that R was beyond him. He would never reach R (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 53-54).*

He confesses that his achievements and contribution feel worthless without approval and sympathy he seeks first from his wife and, following her demise, from Lily Briscoe. At first Lily finds Mr. Ramsay distracting and threatening; when he comes up demanding the sympathy Mrs. Ramsay used to give him, she has none to offer (Thickstun 1988: 129). When she inadvertently praises his boots, she is bewildered to discover that such a simple gesture will suffice. As she has shown herself sensitive to something he cares about deeply, he responds by tying her shoe and in that moment she felt, Thickstun (1988) observes, genuine sympathy for him and wishes to say something, but “*her feeling had come too late [...] he no longer needed it*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 227). When he departs, she is left with her unused sympathy “*troubling her for expression*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 228). Woolf cleverly opens both of their interior worlds for us so we understand what it means for Lily to offer a morsel of sympathy, why Ramsay desperately needs it, and what effect the fortuitous appraisal of boots had on them when they both are closed off from each other’s private consciousness.

Mrs Ramsay needs just as much adulation and praise as her husband. She is saddened by the fact that Carmichael, one of the guests at their summer house, has merely respect but no fondness for her. During the dinner party she was entertaining her guests, engaging them in a conversation, all while the readers are deep in the thoughts of Mr Bankes, one of her oldest friends, and discover that he feels nothing for her.

*'People soon drift apart,' said Mr. Bankes [...] He felt uncomfortable; he felt treacherous; that he could sit by her side and feel nothing for her [...] it had struck him, [...] that friendships, even the best of them, are frail things. One drifts apart. He reproached himself again. He was sitting beside Mrs. Ramsay and he had nothing in the world to say to her (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 133-135).*

His confession of having lost appreciation for her has been undulating in his innermost consciousness and is available only to the readers, not to the unsuspecting Mrs Ramsay, who was at that very moment trying to play the perfect hostess and earn as much sympathy as possible. The readers know Mr Bankes has no admiration for Mrs Ramsay which she needs. For Mrs Ramsay to value men, she needs them to care for her and to admire her (Henry 2016). Internal confessions, 'moments of intimacy' (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 252), are important for character building, but as well as for understating characters true impressions of other characters.

Because Virginia Woolf relies on external and internal perceptions of other actors in the story to develop her characters, characterisation by means of multiple perspectives becomes an important characterisation asset. This is central to Woolf's method of characterisation, by which a figure is illuminated by the external perceptions of others as much as their own internal consciousness (Parsons 2007: 76). But what is even more interesting is how such external perceptions and consequent thoughts and actions directly affect specific characters in the novel.

As much admiration Mrs Ramsay necessitated from others that much she had for her children. Mrs Ramsay loved her children with all her heart and wanted them happy and sheltered from the world. Such intensity of her love caused her to give every part of herself to her children. *"So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for*

*her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent”* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 60). Woolf reveals her emotional attachment to her children through her thoughts and actions. Not only are her internal reflections evidence of her love but Mrs Ramsay goes to great lengths to make her children happy, i.e. standing up to her husband in order to make James’ wish come true.

Mrs Ramsay was in love with the idea of having children as much as she loved her own, especially the youngest James and Cam:

*Oh, but she never wanted James to grow a day older! or Cam either. These two she would have liked to keep for ever just as they were, demons of wickedness, angels of delight, never to see them grow up into long-legged monsters* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 89)

She wanted them to be young and innocent forever, never to leave her embrace, never to let them go in the adult world unprotected. Her internal confessions reflect her emotional attachment for her children. But as it turned out, she could not have protected even herself because time mercilessly moves forward and no one is immune from change or death. As she looks at her children, she reflects that their innocent delight in the moment is a delight that they will seldom be able to experience in adulthood (Duran 2004: 303).

*They were happier now than they would ever be again. A tenpenny tea set made Cam happy for days [...] had their little treasures....And so she went down and said to her husband, Why must they grow up and lose it all?* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 90-91)

The passages of Mrs Ramsay musing about her children explore the emotional sides of Woolf’s character and are some of the most poignant confessional passages of *To the*

*Lighthouse*. Through confessional writing Virginia Woolf regresses back to her childhood while her mother was still alive conveying her desire to spend more time with her.

Mrs Ramsay's undeniable beauty is given through other characters' perceptions and impressions. Charles Tansley has a sudden realisation that "*she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 25), whereas William Bankes thinks of Thomas Love Peacock's verses: "*Nature has but little clay like that of which she moulded you*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 46-47). Mrs. Ramsay appears to be irrefutably beautiful as well as a seemingly divine source of inspiration, however Woolf never explicitly describes her beauty. Lily's painting of her muse, Mrs. Ramsay, presents her as nothing more than a purple triangle (Maguire 2009, as cited in Henry 2016: 3). Her beauty and a passing remark of "*the happier Helen of our days*" (Woolf [1927] 1996: 43) inscribed in Mrs Ramsay's book bring to mind the comparison to the most beautiful woman of the ancient world, Helen of Troy.

Mrs Ramsay's beauty, equal to that of the Trojan belle, transfixes and raises question whether it was a great tragedy or lost love that made her as she is (Henry 2016), or "*was there nothing? nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 46). Both Helen of Troy and Mrs Ramsay are victims of their beauty for others are intimidated to approach them or engage with them and their selfhood suffers from fallacious and prejudiced (mis)conceptions. Mrs Ramsay thus becomes a continuation of the myth of Helen of Troy, 'a confusion of self, an identity fractured by the interpretations thrust on her' (Henry 2016: 6). Even though the barrier Mrs Ramsay's beauty created between her and others in her microcosm makes them approach her with admiration and reverence, it does not prevent her from playing an integral part in the lives of those around her. Her presence, even after her passing, is almost

substantive and affects the lives of her friends and acquaintances, like Lily, Mr Bankes, Tansley, or Paul Rayley. Whether they are present or not, alive or dead, Mrs Ramsay and Helen, wrapped in their indescribable, remote beauty are the axis upon which the plot turns (Maguire 2009, as cited in Henry 2016: 3).

Mrs Ramsay becomes Lily's muse and the subject of the painting she had been working on for the entirety of the novel. Lily is an aspiring painter, an artist, which makes her the closest to Virginia Woolf herself. Lily, living with her elderly father, also experienced the loss of her mother so in Mrs Ramsay she sees a mother figure. Even though we cannot read into Lily's character as a self-projection of Woolf, we can construe her thoughts, confessions, and challenges as those of Woolf herself. Lily Briscoe is introduced as the voice of the authoress. In addition to being her most autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse* thus gets another confessional layer.

Through Lily Virginia Woolf argues her artistic and societal concerns and deliberates on challenges and obstacles set before (especially female) writers, i.e. artists. As a female artist, Thickstun (1988:132) points out, Lily has been unconsciously crippled by her justified resentment of male prejudice against her; now she remembers that it was Charles Tansley who said "*Women can't paint, women can't write...*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 75). It was these words that would haunt Lily and impede her artistic achievements. Charles Tansley, a 'misogynist who denigrates woman's creativity' (Lin 2016) reflects the domineering male attitudes of the world Woolf was living in. She overcomes these obstacles both vicariously, through Lily, in finishing her portrait and in reality by publishing her most confessional and autobiographical fiction. She asserts and shows women can indeed paint and write, even if it means not complying with generally accepted roles of women in society.



Mrs Ramsay, echoing Julia Stephen, portrays the traditional, subservient, restrained woman in a patriarchal world, which Woolf wants to challenge and change. Lily Briscoe, the voice of Virginia Woolf herself, evolves into a new kind of woman, who does not fit into that traditional world, nor wants to. But the new woman cannot simply cut all bonds with traditional patriarchal values and distance herself from the women of her past. In Lily's case, she actually relates to them, she relates to Mrs Ramsay and admires her. The absence of a tradition for Lily to rest on might be compensated by intimacy with Mrs. Ramsay, for whom Lily has great passion (Lin 2016). Lily's thoughts reflect concerns about not fulfilling the role of (traditional) woman, eluding biological and societal imperatives like getting married and having children. She looks up to Mrs Ramsay, and worships her rapport with her family. Mrs Ramsay, the 'Angel of the House' and the epitome of tradition, embraces conventional gender roles and sees raising her children and supporting her husband, despite marital setbacks, as her ultimate goal. Her credo "*people must marry; people must have children*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 93), believing marriage to be the only road to happiness, guided her in setting people together, including Paul with Minta and Lily with Mr Bankes. Paul's successful courting of Minta excites Mrs Ramsay, whereas Lily's progressive and avant-garde opinions of remaining unwed trouble her. Lily "*liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 77) and opted out of socially imposed married life only to pursue art and take care of her father. By wishing for the marvel of a creative woman subjugated to marriage, she is the accomplice of the compulsory gender role defined by patriarchy (Lin 2016). It comes as no surprise that, Lin (2016) notices, Mrs Ramsay sides with Charles Tansley's view toward Lily's art: "*one could not take her painting very seriously*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 29). Though Lily admired Mrs Ramsay's family life and fulfilling her gender role, with time she realises Mrs Ramsay's role will belong to the

past and what Mrs Ramsay does, what is expected from a woman (her legacy), Lily can do through her preferred medium – art.

However, despite representing two different worlds, they are actually more alike than meets the eye. Lily eventually realises that Mrs Ramsay’s maintaining social order with engaging with her family, supporting her husband, or entertaining guests draws, as Thickstun (1988: 133) observes, upon the fleeting moments when eternity intersects with time, those “*little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 236). What Lily does with her art, ‘*making of the moment something permanent*’, Mrs Ramsay was actually doing that through other medium. While Lily thought she was rejecting Mrs Ramsay's example, she was in fact unconsciously learning and applying it to her own endeavours. Their respective goals of social and artistic order were actually the same all along:

*In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she repeated. She owed it all to her* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 240-241).

#### **4.3 ‘Nothing was simply one thing’: emotion vs ratio**

Virginia Woolf’s confessional writing relies on internal perception, introspection and self-perception; however, in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf cleverly juxtaposes internal with external perception, or self-perception with perception of others to achieve the virtual completeness and realness of her characters. Dualities are employed as vehicles for characterisation but they also

function as themes, for *To the Lighthouse* explores the clash of emotion and reason, and other dichotomies, for instance discerning reality from illusion.

The following exploration of Mr Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay, and their youngest son, James' tumultuous triadic relationship, whose Oedipal undertones can be approached from a psychoanalytical angle, will try to elicit perceptual dualities that construct Woolf's characters and briefly demonstrate some thematic dualities Virginia Woolf touches upon in developing her narrative.

A tender and sensitive six-year-old James Ramsay, whose greatest desire was to visit the nearby lighthouse, is the youngest among the eight children of the Ramsay family. His loving mother, Mrs Ramsay, full of compassion, affection and love for her son, assures him they will go to the lighthouse if the weather allows them, and she is confident it will. "*Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow,*" said Mrs. Ramsay. "*But you'll have to be up with the lark,*" she added" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 9). She is determined to do anything in her power to make him happy. Contrasted to her, there is his strict and rigid philosopher father, Mr Ramsay, who advocates reason and logic and believes his children should be raised aware of the world's sternness, that they have to fight for what they need, expecting no mercy or compassion:

*any mortal being, least of all of his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness [...], one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure* (Woolf, [1927] 1996:11, original emphases)

While Mrs Ramsay's world is dominated by emotions, his is overwhelmed with reason. That is the reason behind his resentment and disapproval of his wife's embellishment of the truth and irrational hope of visiting the lighthouse the next day. "*The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds enraged him*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 50). Woolf criticises the derogation of women and inability to express one's beliefs or hopes if they contradict the firm rationality. Mrs Ramsay, in spite of her husband, hopes the following day will permit them to set sail for the lighthouse, but Mr Ramsay's rational mind sees the barometer falling and knows the wind was due west. "*But,*" said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, "*it won't be fine*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 10).

Nevertheless, Mrs Ramsay, in her defiance and optimism, did not lose hope and continued making the stockings for the lighthouse keeper's son, a symbol of her hope and opposition to her husband, in case the voyage to the lighthouse does take place. She could not fathom her husband's stark assurance that tomorrow's trip is already called off. The relationship between Mr. Ramsay's world of rationally apprehended fact and Mrs. Ramsay's world of intuitively apprehended vision is figured symbolically in the novel by the central image of the lighthouse itself (Thickstun 1988: 115-116). These two very strong, very different influences: emotion and reason, will continue to affect young James, especially throughout the first section of the novel.

Mr Ramsay's distant approach to James deconstructs the naïveté and innocence of his childhood. His young and innocent heart was prone to side with his mother and condemn the coldness of his father, who did not even realise he was inadvertently hurting and alienating his son with his crude rationality. It comes as no surprise that James confesses that his mother "*was ten thousand times better in every way*" (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 10) than his father. Her words

“conveyed an extraordinary joy” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 9) to James while his father’s sharp contradictory remark started off a lifelong hatred, even murderous rage towards his father. “*Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 10). It is frightening to find out that a child, at such an early age, could harbour such strong negative feelings towards anyone, let alone his own father. The hatred and resentment towards his father is starkly juxtaposed with great love and endearment young James feels towards his mother.

Though it could be difficult to get enough attention in a ten-member family, the bond between Mrs Ramsay and her youngest son was surprisingly strong. There are numerous scenes in the first section of the novel to corroborate Mrs Ramsay’s love for her son, but one of the very best examples is one scene which ‘does not happen’. “*In a moment he would ask her, "Are we going to the Lighthouse?" And she would have to say, "No: not tomorrow; your father says not"* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 94-95). Luckily, Mildred, the children’s nurse, came in to get him ready for bed, thus saving Mrs Ramsay from breaking her son’s heart by crushing his dreams of visiting the lighthouse, what his father was repeatedly doing. This excerpt of free indirect discourse blends narration with Mrs Ramsay’s introspection and emotional pain. “*But he kept looking back over his shoulder as Mildred carried him out, and she was certain that he was thinking, we are not going to the Lighthouse tomorrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 95). A moment from her past, because Mrs Ramsay recalls her son’s disappointment from earlier that day, haunts its way into her duration. It is that memory that instigates a projection of a previous sentiment to the present moment, which due to Mildred’s serendipitous intervention does not realise. Instead of James’, it was her heart that was broken.

She knew that kind of disappointment and pain is not something easy to forget and was afraid it would haunt her beloved son for the rest of his life: “*children never forget*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 95), the words ominously echoed in her consciousness.

It was not until the very ending of the first, also the longest, section of the novel that Mrs Ramsay finally complies with her husband’s decision to postpone the trip to the lighthouse. Mrs Ramsay loved her husband but could not make herself express her feelings to him; she just could not find the right words. Similar scene occurs in *Mrs Dalloway* when Richard, unable to confess verbally his love for Clarissa, buys her flowers as a token of affection he is certain she is aware of.

*He wanted something—wanted the thing she always found it so difficult to give him; wanted her to tell him that she loved him. And that, no, she could not do. He found talking so much easier than she did. He could say things—she never could. [...] A heartless woman he called her; she never told him that she loved him. But it was not so—it was not so. It was only that she never could say what she felt. [...] Will you not tell me just for once that you love me? [...] But she could not do it; she could not say it. [...] And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)-*

*"Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go." And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 184-186)*

In the climactic scene when Mrs Ramsay finally agrees with her husband not to visit the lighthouse, the idea she ardently fought against, we realise she did love him and that was her way of letting him know, even if that led to her son being hurt and possibly scarred for life. However,

in a marital sense, Mrs Ramsay is triumphant for she displayed resistance and held back the words he desperately needed to hear. Woolf here emphasises the clash between two opposing viewpoints: Mrs Ramsay's emotion and passion must be extinguished at the expense of Mr Ramsay's cold, unrelenting intellect.

The third and withal last section takes us ten years after the events that happened at the beginning of the novel. Ten years passed, the First World War raged and ended, Mrs Ramsay and two of her children, Andrew and Prue, died and the rest of the family were left to deal with the horrific repercussions. Some members of the family and some of their friends returned to their old vacation house on the Island of Skye and the trip to the lighthouse once again becomes an issue. However, the tables have turned. Now it is Mr Ramsay who desperately wants to embark on the trip, whereas his children, James and Cam, still consumed with hatred towards their father, are hesitant and unwilling to go. The mixing of memory and desire is what finally prompts Mr. Ramsay to undertake his voyage to the lighthouse, years after his wife's death (McIntire 2008: 178). He is determined to undertake that commemorative act, haunted by the memory of his late wife and her unfulfilled wish to visit the lighthouse keeper and his ill son ten years ago. The notion of making his wife pleased would bring calmness to his shaken spirit after her sudden passing, for he knew that she was generous and altruistic and how much that visit meant to her, and to their son. Only in this passage across the water, which he undertakes calmly, [...] while he allows James to do the sailing, is he able to realize his deceased wife's optimistic wish for her son's happiness (McIntire 2008: 178).

Mr Ramsay was a university philosophy professor and an author whose happiness depended on his wife's appraisal and assurance that his books were well written and useful for

generations to come. He never regretted getting married or having children, but strongly believed that his family was the reason his academic life suffered. Now that Mrs Ramsay, his emotive pillar, was gone, Mr Ramsay lost his support and withal the authoritative voice, meaning he has to redefine his role in the family.

In the first section of the novel the readers are presented with Mr Ramsay's ruminations and concerns, that is, we are given his perspective, which results in our understanding of his character through his own point of view, i.e. self-perception. The last section offers James' and Cam's perceptions of their father, thus rounding his character and exposing their innermost and latent emotions and thoughts, merely hinted at before. James denounces his father in his mind, Monti (1991) observes, whereas Cam remembers with an anguished shudder her father's domineering attitude towards her.

*But what remained intolerable, she thought, sitting upright [...] was that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms, so that even now she woke in the night trembling with rage and remembered some command of his; some insolence: "Do this," "Do that," his dominance: his "Submit to me." (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 249)*

Watching the shores Cam's stream of thoughts takes her to the past, which she now perceives as unreal, something so distant that appears it had been rubbed out of the existence. Her present moment seems the only reality. What is real for a given character has a great deal to do with the importance of a given moment in the character's internal construction of self and time (Duran 2004: 302). Cam's perceptive reality is a conglomerate of her past and present



experiences because she does not deny her past but seeks it out in her present, which in that moment becomes real.

*She was thinking how all those paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past; were unreal, and now this was real; the boat and the sail with its patch; Macalister with his earrings; the noise of the waves—all this was real* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 244-245).

James, who “*had steered them like a born sailor*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 302) thought, just like his sister Cam did, that Mr Ramsay’s self-will and authority have been hindering their self-actualisation since their childhood. They believed their father made them feel insignificant and submissive, that he was estranged from them: always concerned with philosophy, never with family. James was certain those feelings, which made their home in his duration, would never fade, and Cam’s continuation of submission to their father only fed into his resentment. The novel’s primal scene begins to re-emerge when James, enraged at Cam’s submission to Mr. Ramsay, remembers how his mother had capitulated to her husband’s imperious demand for sympathy (Ellmann 2010: 85). As a child, he dared not to oppose his father, but ten years passed and he has matured, which means he can understand him better, though he cannot forgive him just yet. The father and son are Greek tragic characters set upon a *primaeval* stage of violence and murder, as Monti (1991) proposes, though the weapon is not a real one, such as it would have been in classical or Elizabethan drama, but a rhetorical and stylized image giving verbal shape to the mute turmoil of love and hate racking the mind of James.

In order to escape the tense situation on the boat, for James was certain if the wind did not blow, his father would blame him, what would release his repressed anger and lead him to plunge

a (metaphorical) knife into his father's heart, James returns to his past. His past coexists with his present, so his consciousness reintroduces his childhood memories still lingering in his duration. Both siblings seek comfort in their memories, where their beloved mother is still alive. As Thickstun (1988: 131) notices, 'Cam, looking back at the island, gradually drifts off into sleep remembering the words and the scene her mother conjured up to put her to sleep at the end of the first day of the novel. In remembering experiences with their mother on the day that this voyage was promised, both children are subconsciously in touch with the temporal consonance between this day and that particular day in the past'. But as their father corrupted everything, he corrupted their reminiscence as well. James was afraid Mr Ramsay could peak into his mind and deprecate him and realises that his thoughts concerning his mother are disturbed by the paralyzing presence of his father (Monti 1991). His father's shadow will linger over James' life forever.

Woolf penetrates James' fragile psyche at a crucial moment, when his internalised hatred and the bulk of negative emotions he was not able to fully comprehend as a child starts to thaw and he begins to see his father as a weak old man. The manifestation of his antagonism becomes a black-winged harpy descended on the helpless old man:

*Only now, as he grew older, and sat staring at his father in an impotent rage, it was not him, that old man reading, whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that descended on him--without his knowing it perhaps: that fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck at you (he could feel the beak on his bare legs, where it had struck when he was a child) and then made off, and there he was again, an old man, very sad, reading his book. That he would kill, that he would strike to the heart (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 269-270).*

We are led to believe James is still convinced that his father did not change his ways after all these years and continues to be authoritative and self-willed, which he sees as a way of violence directed at his family. However, when he compares his father and his *violence* to a “*wheel that crushes innocent feet in the grass*” (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 271), it is the first time that we begin to realise that James tries to defend his father, tries to find some sort of justification and tries to forgive him because the wheel does not have malicious intentions on its own: the wheel crushes, but the wheel cannot be blamed. His father hurts him, but his father cannot be blamed. During the course of the voyage, Thickstun (1988: 131) remarks, all three Ramsays experience an emotional transformation: their resentment gradually fades away and by the time they arrive they are all at peace with each other and with themselves.

When the wind finally blew and helped James navigate the vessel to the lighthouse, it brought a sense of relief and obviated James’ feelings of uneasiness, fear and infirmity. During the time when James’ restless spirit suffered and while he was going through a painful, emotional ordeal, his father, on the other hand, was completely and utterly oblivious of his children’s drama of consciousness, comfortably lost in his world, just like he has been all his life, reading a book, or chanting lines from William Cowper’s *The Castaway*. Lines reverberated most often “*We perished, each alone*” vex his children for he comes across as the most stricken by the tragic loss of his wife and children. However, the family should be together in their grief, not *alone*, and offer each other comfort and sympathy, because Mr Ramsay is not the sole mourner, James and Cam lost their mother and siblings as well, and their grief is equally resonant.

Finally nearing their goal, James sees the lighthouse, for now they were very close. When James sees the lighthouse up close, the worlds of imagination and reality suddenly clash. Woolf

here once again cleverly introduces the idea of duality: two different yet indivisible sides of the same notion. James realises the lighthouse is not the mythical place of his childhood, the mysterious and idolised tower blinking at him from the darkness but a plain, old tower.

*James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?*

*No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 272-273).*

James accepted that the illusion from his childhood differs from the reality of his present moment standing before him. “For nothing was simply one thing”. However, he realises that even though the lighthouse of today is real, its existence does not negate the existence of the lighthouse of his childhood. Both are real, and both can coexist in his mind. He understands that with time everything changes: the lighthouse, his father. James will not be able to forgive his father or justify his actions if he only sees him as a tyrannical despot like he did when he was a six-year-old child. Confessional writing allows Woolf to lay to rest some of her real-life trauma for in her young age, just like James, she was ‘dominated by frustration and rebellion against the exacting emotional demands of a man she would remember with ambivalence as ‘the tyrant father’” (Parsons 2007: 6).

Upon arriving to the lighthouse, Mr Ramsay said to his son: “*Well done!*”, unaware of his need of appraisal. But these two simple words from his father conveyed incomparable

satisfaction to James. It was what he had been waiting his whole life, for his father to notice him, to praise him. He then acted indifferently, sitting in silence, avoiding any eye contact. *“He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody share a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. They must think that he was perfectly indifferent. But you've got it now, Cam thought”* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 302). The scene is observed through Cam’s point of view and due to the bond between brother and sister, *“united by their compact to fight tyranny to the death”* (Woolf, [1927] 1996: 241), she knew exactly how much that meant to him and she silently congratulated him, letting him savour this immense, nearly incomprehensible happiness, which he did not want to share with anyone.

Mr Ramsay and his son are more alike than their antithetical relationship indicates or than they would like to admit. Their lack of emphatic perceptive awareness brings them together rather than divides them and hints at James’ following in his father’s footsteps in becoming more and more like his loathsome father, desperate for appraisal and oblivious to the sensitive side of his rival(s).

## Conclusion

Virginia Woolf was interested in an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. In *Mrs Dalloway* she catches Clarissa as she makes preparations for her party and unravels her whole life in a single day. In *To the Lighthouse* she explores the relationships of the Ramsay family and their friends on two summer days. The limitation of time and plot enables her to penetrate deep into the thoughts of her characters and illuminate their interior worlds, with all their sentiments, regrets, and insecurities. The character's inner world is externalised through mental processes, which abstract, concrete, or compress feeling into image, metaphor, and symbol, and so explore areas of submerged emotion usually glimpsed only by the dreaming mind (Harvena 1970). Employing her 'tunnelling process', Woolf digs deep to explore the 'moments of being' and expose the true vulnerability and humanness characters predominantly lacked in hitherto published fiction. Woolf was thus one of the pioneers of a new subjective realism, as Parsons (2007: 53) concludes: exchanging the traditional representation of a character's social development for the expression of his or her individual psychological being, the external description of scene for the internal revelation of consciousness, and chronological narrative and dramatic plot for the flux of momentary thoughts and impressions that constitute mental life.

Woolf's confessional writing does not comprise only the first-person narration, reliance on free indirect discourse and 'stream of consciousness' writing, and her expression of thoughts, truths, and concerns. Woolf introduces into her fiction her own life: her family and trauma, thus blurring the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. *To the Lighthouse* was a therapeutic confession of her childhood trauma, which rubbed out her obsession with her parents. Can we

then assume Woolf's same-sex affair with Vita Sackville-West was the inspiration behind Clarissa's infatuation with the elusive Sally? Is the unfortunate ending of that relationship the trigger for Clarissa's lovelorn life? Woolf draws upon her life experience, but the characters and their destinies and choices are only inspirations, not projections of her real life. Woolf's intention was not to produce an autobiographical rendering of her experiences enveloped in a cloak of fictionality; she only confessed her truths for a 'heart healing' effect.

In her fiction Woolf achieves effortless transition from her characters' external worlds to their internal consciousness just as from the present to the past. As they are frequently struggling to come to terms with their present, Woolf's characters experience a crisis of consciousness and revert to their past and memories. That is to say that a remarkable feature of Woolf's work is the extent to which interiors are portrayed not only through 'stream-of-consciousness', but through an internalization of time (Duran 2004: 302). *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* thus stand as some of the most exceptional introspective modernist fictions.

Duran's internalisation of time as a means of characterisation appears to reflect Bergson's concept of duration. Even though Woolf asserted she never read Bergson, she was familiar with his work through her Bloomsbury Group companions and there is a clear distinction between 'mind time' and 'actual time' in her later fiction. We can follow her gradual shift from a more traditional view of time (linear, chronological, clock—time) to something in the vein of Bergson's *la durée*. However, Woolf never completely abandons standard passage of time, represented by clocks, like Big Ben or St Margaret in *Mrs Dalloway*, not even when she plunges into and articulates the psychologies of her characters and their durations, comprised of streams

of thoughts, recollections, sentiments, memories, which, of course, results in the subjective perception of time.

Woolf's experimental presentation of time induced many interpretations, for instance, Banfield's proposition of time as a series of still moments, preserved by crystallisation. By close reading of Woolf's prose we understand that the meaning is not in eternalising the moment but living in the moment before it passes away. Moments can be preserved by turning them into memories. In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf explores the opposition between ephemeral and eternal. She deliberates over them by portraying characters like Mrs Ramsay, whose ruminations and confessions tell us about their concerns about what we lose to time or how we can make something last forever.

Virginia Woolf, a master of words, produced a coveted number of fiction and nonfiction works. In many she confessed her own truths, her own fears and concerns. "Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for many centuries" Woolf writes in her 1937 essay *Craftmanship* and asks herself "How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?" (as cited in Parsons 2007: 130)

Her prose demonstrates the beauty and honesty of words, whereas her status as the one of arguably the greatest minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century attest to her genius and relevancy. Woolf did not just bring into being her characters, she reflected on her own life and experiences, and she breathed life into them. In confessional writing one can expose their private persona carelessly



and unwillingly, but Woolf, through her literary confessions, cleverly avoids such pitfalls for she wrote 'lies', or rather fiction, which actually revealed the truth.

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