

"the mark on the wall"
as a representation of
the thought process



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" Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing... There is a vast upheaval of matter." (Woolf 89). In Virginia Woolf's 1917 " The Mark on the Wall", the narrator is reflecting on the day she saw a marking on her wall and became utterly perplexed by it. As she stares at the wall, the thoughts in her head seem meaningless, just random ideas strung together as they enter her mind. She claims not to be able to remember anything, which is the real purpose of her reveries in this stream-of-consciousness narrative. Upon further consideration, however, it becomes clear that she is really describing the thought process and its challenges, and how difficult it becomes to focus when one is overcome with thought.

As the story opens, the narrator attempts to identify the first time she noticed the mark. This is accomplished by her recollection of the way the fire lit up the pages of her book, and how she was holding a cigarette, making it clear that it was both winter and after her dinnertime. At this point, her memory is serving a purpose, helping her focus on the mark and discover what it is. Yet as she sees the fire, her mind wanders to an old daydream of a fire-colored flag waving over a castle, as knights march by in front (Woolf 83). This, she states, was " an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps" (Woolf 83), and she mentions that it is a relief to be interrupted by the sight of the mark, thus ending her first reverie. This is the first occasion that readers experience the wandering mind of our narrator, and the mention of the childlike quality proves the immaturity of the daydream and its lack of connection to what she is really thinking about.

Her thoughts jump quickly to the mark on the wall, and then immediately she falls back into daydreams, this time pondering how exactly thoughts

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work, as they "swarm" a new idea so aggressively and then disappear, as if nothing ever happened (Woolf 83). This idea is placed at a very interesting point by Woolf, seeing as as soon as the narrator concludes the idea that thoughts can come and go in an instant, she jumps back to the mark. Not only has she now stated that thoughts and ideas are impermanent, we quickly see this in action as she abandons the discussion of thought to consider the mark once again. Each time she is brought back to her topic of the mark, her mind carries her away swiftly so that she can make no progress in discovering what it actually is.

The narrator follows this with an idea that the mark has been made by a nail, which sends her into another reverie, this time about what could have been hanging there. She insists it was a "miniature", and accompanies this assertion with a colorful yet unnecessary description of the woman in the miniature. Without ever telling her audience why, she begins discussing the previous owners' redecorating habits, and their particular designs based on each room and the age of the place. This catches readers off guard, confirming that thoughts are fleeting and disconnected. As she reconnects with the mark, the narrator's thoughts drift towards the idea of thinking itself. She is struck by how common thoughts are yet how they are gone in an instant. The idea that something is over as soon as it happens, and cannot be recovered, is emphasized as she exclaims "Oh! Dear me, the mystery of life! The inaccuracy of thought...To show how very little control of our possessions we have!" (Woolf 84). These "possessions" are moments, thoughts and ideas that are not tangible and cannot be grasped on to, which is why they are so fleeting and disconnected. The following lines where the

narrator begins to count the things she has lost and immediately cuts into saying " what cat would gnaw, what rat would nibble..." (Woolf 84) highlights her mental distance from everything she is thinking of.

While her ideas that thoughts are fleeting and quick to disappear are accurate, the narrator's audience cannot be sure that she is as reliable as she seems. Even as she is considering the images she has lost, presumably all of the times she has lost her train of thought, she loses that idea too and goes into saying things like " three pale blue canisters of book binding tools" (Woolf 84), which sounds more like an alliterative melody than an important object she is longing for. It is easily understood that this is a " stream of consciousness" narrative by her lack of dialogue and unrelated consecutive ideas throughout. Woolf, through the narrator, succeeds in using this style in order to prove the point her narrator is thinking about. As she is telling readers that thoughts are impermanent, unreliable notions, she is also showing us how they affect a normal stream of thought for a " real" women, and distract her from her focus - the mark on the wall. Through this, Woolf accomplishes a great feat in forcing every reader to asses their thoughts and ideas, and how they affect our everyday focus.