

Psychological realism in to the lighthouse



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Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* achieves an accurate and effective portrayal of psychological realism, which is understood for the duration of this essay as a strong emphasis on deep interior characterisation and an understanding of how these interior psychological processes influence external actions. To understand how *To the Lighthouse* exemplifies psychological realism, we must consider the psychology of the mind itself, drawing on theories from both philosophers and psychologists, focusing on William James, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud, and their theories of the stream of thought, metaphysics and creative evolution, and dream theory, respectively. These theories, placed within the context of Woolf's use of stream of consciousness within *To the Lighthouse*, illuminate her successful attempt to infuse her novel with psychological realism as she explores the complex processes of the interior mind.

James's understanding of the consciousness is based upon a presumption of mental continuity, which he defines as "that which is without breach, crack, or division" (154). He proposes that the consciousness feels continuous, while experience two types of interruptions: time-gaps (e. g. when asleep), and "breaks in the quality, or content, of the thought, so abrupt that the segment that followed had no connection whatever with the one that went before" (154, emphasis in original). I introduce James's theory of the stream of thought to draw from this idea of a break in the quality or content of the thought; this is used heavily in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* during moments of interior monologue. A single example from a myriad spread across the entirety of the text is the dinner table scene, in which we descend into Lily Briscoe's interior mind as she considers the impending marriage of Minta

Doyle and Paul Rayley: " For any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle." (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 111)

While her mind begins on the subject of her distaste for marriage, she abruptly moves to a thought about her painting; there is no substantial interior link between these topics, and no physical cue in the exterior world. However, this transition is paradoxically smooth despite the abruptness of the topic change, illustrating James's idea that: "...the transition between the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the thought than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood. It is a part of the consciousness as much as the joint is a part of the bamboo." (156, emphasis in original) This simultaneously reinforces James's assertion that the consciousness resembles most in metaphor a river or stream as it flows, uninterrupted. So neatly does Woolf expose this interior flow that psychological realism is not simply attempted, but achieved with stunning simplicity. Furthermore, the interior mind of Lily Briscoe is stretching out to present an idea of following through with an action in the exterior world; she will move the tree towards the middle when she next paints, illustrating the transition between interior mind and exterior world as causal, in which her thoughts, for all their fragmentation, are influencing her actions.

Bergson similarly explores the continuity of consciousness in his work on creative evolution, stating that " there is no feeling, no idea, no volition which is not undergoing change every moment: if a mental state ceased to vary, its duration would cease to flow" (2). The key word within Bergson's

theory of creative evolution is “ duration”, which he describes as “ the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” (Creative Evolution 5). Again, I would like to use Lily Briscoe as my example of how this philosophical theory illuminates Woolf’s portrayal of psychological realism in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily’s painting, beginning in ‘ The Window’ and concluding in the final moments of ‘ The Lighthouse’, spans the entirety of the novel. I propose that this painting is a physical manifestation of this idea of “ duration”; as the novel progresses, the need to finish the painting hangs over her, disrupting her thoughts as previously indicated in the context of James’s theory of the stream of thought . By the final moments of the narrative, the vision of the painting which has weighed on her increasingly as time has passed finally becomes clear to her: “ She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 226) The ultimate climax of this moment of clarity has been built up throughout the novel as Lily tries and fails to paint, disrupted by her own sense of inadequacy, which is exacerbated in the first section ‘ The Window’ by the harsh criticism of Charles Tansley. Lily carries this past with her, grappling with it repeatedly as she continues to attempt to paint, eventually succeeding in a moment of clarity. What happens after this is of no consequence, as the character ceases to exist beyond the page, but the flow of thought, constant throughout the novel, indicates that this is a permanent fixture in consciousness as a whole. The painting is of focus for Lily, representing for us the idea of duration as part of

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a mental state that is constantly in flux and constantly building upon itself. As such, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* highlights both the continuity of thought and the flux of thought, as exemplified in Lily and her painting; adherence to psychological realism is evident as both complex in its placement within the text, spanning from beginning to end, and punctuating the climax of the text in simple, clear vocabulary.

Through Bergson's broader exploration of metaphysics, we can also introduce the topic of time into our study of psychological realism in *To the Lighthouse*. Expanding on our understanding of duration, Bergson describes duration functioning through two different parts (a multiplicity and a unity), described as "a multiplicity of moments bound to each other by a unity which goes through them like a thread" (Introduction to *Metaphysics*, 50), stating that: "In the first hypothesis we have a world resting on nothing, which must end and begin again of its own accord at each instant. In the second we have an infinity of abstract eternity, about which also it is just as difficult to understand why it does not remain enveloped in itself and how it allows things to coexist with it." (Introduction to *Metaphysics*, 52) Despite this paradox, Bergson explains that whichever metaphysic we consider ourselves in, "there is only one unique duration, which carries everything with it - a bottomless, bankless river, which flows without assignable force in a direction which could not be defined" (Introduction to *Metaphysics*, 53). Again, we return to the idea of the river, now dominating not only the flow of the interior mind, but the flow of time.

In *To the Lighthouse*, we experience exterior time of just two days, and much, much more interior time. The scene in which Mrs. Ramsay is stitching

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the stocking for the Lighthouse keeper's little boy (31-35) is mere minutes in exterior time, yet covers a great deal of insight into Mrs. Ramsay's interior mind. This is representative of the great paradox of duration both in terms of the flow of time and the flow of the mind; Mrs. Ramsey considers her house, her husband, her children, books, the Swiss maid, the weather, and both her own perception of herself, and how she believes herself to be perceived by others, all in the small moment in which she holds a stocking against the leg of James. Time appears to cease inside her interior mind, or at the very least, flows extremely slowly, while her thoughts appear fragmented but flow with an exquisite sense of being natural, seeming organic despite leaping from topic to topic. As Erich Auerbach describes in the midst of his textual analysis of this very scene, "the exterior events have actually lost their hegemony, they serve to release and interpret inner events... this too is apparent in the randomness and contingency of the exterior occasion (looking up because James does not keep his foot still), which releases the much more significant process" (538). The inner mind of Mrs. Ramsay becomes the focus, as opposed to the exterior events; these exterior events serve to disrupt the flow of the interior mind and illuminate their effect on the exterior events themselves. Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts are disturbed by the fidgeting of her son, and once shaken from her interior mind and into exterior events, she is consequently sharp with him. The accuracy of this event in regards to psychological realism is clear, as such a thing has occurred to anyone shaken from a moment of deep thought, immersed as they are within their own mind and then shaken into reality with a jolt.

Upon reaching the works of Sigmund Freud does the idea of psychological realism become convoluted; separating the idea of dreaming and the idea of the subconscious as divined through dreams must occur, and we must translate this into *To the Lighthouse*, where one can never be truly sure if one is experiencing the character's subconscious or their conscious, mixed and layered as they are. Freud's dream theory delves into the subconscious mind, considering latent dream-thoughts as "transformed into a collection of sensory images and visual scenes" (20) that are "condensed", and proposing that: "As a result of condensation, one element in the manifest dream may correspond to numerous elements in the latent dream-thoughts; but, conversely too, one element in the dream-thoughts may be represented by several images in the dream." (20) Once more, the example of Lily Briscoe springs to mind when we consider this idea of condensation, and once more, her painting is the focal point. The painting itself, a single element, is representative of several things throughout the novel, which we discover through moments of exploration in her interior mind. The painting is associated with her sense of failure, as established previously; it is linked to her disdain of marriage; it provides the setting for a moment of confused longing for what she originally perceives to be Mrs. Ramsay herself, and what she discovers, is actually a longing to have the aura Mrs. Ramsay has: "That people should love like this, that Mr. Bankes should feel this for Mr. Ramsay (she glances at him musing) was helpful, was exalting. She wiped one brush after another upon a piece of old rag, menially, on purpose. She took shelter from the reverence which covered all women; she felt herself praised. Let him gaze; she would steal a look at her picture." (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 54) The painting functions as a single element that forces Lily to

do battle with her subconscious, as illustrated by her following frustration with her “ failed” painting. Woolf has clearly condensed many of Lily’s subconscious fears into the single element of the painting, much as Freud’s theory describes latent -dream thoughts of being condensed into a single visual or sensory images. Again, I assert that Woolf has done this with stunning simplicity, achieving a sense of psychological realism that represents the subconscious as layered and imbued with meaning on each level, culminating in an accurate portrayal of the interior mind.

Psychological realism in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* is clearly not merely approached or attempted, but fully achieved. Her representation of the interior mind is stunningly accurate, and undoubtedly modernist not simply in her stream of consciousness style, but in what she is choosing to portray: focus on the internal psychology of character, fragmented as it may be, is a far cry from novels which seek only to tell a story. *To the Lighthouse* does indeed successfully tell a narrative story, but it also tells the story of the human mind, in all its glory, or even lack thereof. Virginia Woolf shows us a luminous halo.

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