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TECHNIQUES USED BY WOOLF TO PROVIDE INSIGHTS INTO THE PSYCHES OF HER FEMALE AND GENDER AMBIGUOUS PROTAGONISTS IN *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf uses free indirect speech and the stream of consciousness techniques extensively to provide insights into the psyches of her female and gender ambiguous protagonists to enable the readers to enter into their thoughts. The focus of this article is on an examination of how through the use of these techniques the protagonists' multiple perspectives on other characters and ambiguous gender related issues are elucidated. The article will aim to show how through the effective use of the above mentioned techniques, characters' verbal expressions of how they feel about issues and other protagonists do not always correlate with their actual interpretations of reality. The techniques will be explicated with specific reference to how the psyches of the female and gender ambiguous protagonists' are constantly shifting and morphing.

Key Words: psyches – gender ambiguous-free indirect speech- writing techniques-subconscious minds

Introduction

In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf uses the stream of consciousness technique extensively in order to provide us with insights into the characters' psyches. This technique enables the reader to delve into the minds of the characters and to follow their thought processes as they reflect on a variety of experiences and issues and provide commentaries on their perceptions of characters that they interact with. Woolf is able to apply the stream of consciousness technique effectively by employing the use of free indirect speech and multiple perspectives. The article aims to show how Woolf uses the latter in order to effect stream of consciousness, but specifically with reference to the female and gender ambiguous protagonists who try to reform their worlds according to their own

enlightened ideas. The essay will focus on the skillful manner in which Woolf uses the stream of consciousness techniques to provide insights into the psyches of the chief female protagonists namely Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe.

Woolf's use of free indirect speech

The use of free indirect speech is specifically employed in this novel to contribute to the open text that Woolf creates in her narrative. It is evident that she aims to construct a novel which enables the readers to have access to the characters' psyches so that they can experience firsthand what the characters are thinking and feeling and what their perceptions of other characters and events are. In this sense then the use of free indirect speech draws the reader into the thought processes of the chief protagonists and

enables them to become part of the experiences. As a modernist writer Woolf has obviously broken from the traditional cannon in terms of how indirect speech should be employed in a novel, because she perceives the strategy as being far more effective and compatible with the stream of consciousness technique than the norm. As the spoken words of the various characters fall onto the minds of others they are automatically interwoven into the thought processes of characters which enables them to reflect critically on what was said and on the basis thereof, to make their own valued judgements. Had Woolf used the traditional approach to indirect speech according to the rules and bearing the tenses in mind it would have slowed down the novel considerably thereby inhibiting the reader from following the thought processes adequately especially considering that Woolf intended to make the psyches of the characters accessible to her readers.

Woolf's aim in using free indirect speech is to provide us with insights into what happens within the psyche as the words penetrate the mind. The approach which she adopts to merge the indirect speech with the thought processes is an interesting and effective one as it ensures that the characters' minds remain open at all times thereby enabling the readers to flit into and out of them from one character to the next.

This transmigration from one character's psyche into another and from one experience to another is possible as a result of the modernist technique namely free indirect speech which she so effectively incorporates into her novel. As readers we thus constantly find ourselves in the position of saying that a perception could be in the mind of a character and that no indication has been given to us that we have passed out of one character's mind into that of another and yet to accept the perception as part of this character's stream of thought and perception would require a marked shift in our attitude. According to Hewitt (117) however it seems clear that what is often happening is that Virginia Woolf is herself commenting without separating the character and the creator. In this sense then she is able to retain her role as the

omniscient narrator throughout the narration which she weaves.

Free indirect speech is incorporated most significantly into Woolf's portrayal of her female and gender-ambiguous protagonists who imagine that they will be able to reform their world according to their own enlightened ideas. Both Mrs Ramsay and Lily, for example, are able to react immediately in their psyches to the kind of assertions that the male protagonists make about them in particular or women in general and we as the readers are able to follow these thought processes as they reflect directly on the words in the recesses of their minds.

Lily's analysis of the characters of Mr Banks and Mr Ramsay, for example, reflect how skillfully Woolf has merged free indirect speech into her narrative. This comparison is highlighted in her psyche as follows:

You (Mr Banks) have greatness, she continued, but Mr Ramsay has none of it. He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant; he wears Mrs Ramsay to death...(Woolf, 20)

In an analysis of this short excerpt it appears as if Lily is addressing Mr Banks directly yet these words are embedded in her psyche as she observes him. This is what she would like to say to him, but which she dares not say for apparent reasons. This example highlights her impressions of the two male protagonists as she compares them in her psyche. However, we are also made aware of the demands which Mr Ramsay makes on his wife as he "wears (her) to death" (20). Mrs Ramsay is portrayed here in Lily's psyche as a subservient wife since she allows her husband to manipulate and control her to such an extent that she is reduced to a slave. This is how Lily perceives the relationships between Mr and Mrs Ramsay based on her own observations and as they are manifested in her psyche. It is ironic that Lily interprets the relationship between the two in this way, because Mrs Ramsay tries to project the image of herself as a liberated woman who strives to assert herself in society by, for example, walking to town with a basket of food for the needy, by insisting on carrying her own bag and by the manner in which she affirms herself as a woman in a somewhat

patriarchal society. The excerpt incorporating free indirect speech thus highlights the gender ambiguous role of Mrs Ramsay. On one level she is the independent, goal directed, liberated woman whilst on another she is the subservient, submissive wife who succumbs to the whims and fancies of a demanding and overbearing husband.

Lily's reference to Mrs Ramsay's subjugation by her husband in the above excerpt is in stark contrast to the image which she (Mrs Ramsay) tries to project of herself in her role as the queen as follows:

So she must go down and begin dinner and wait. And, like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them, and descends among them, and acknowledges their tributes silently, and accepts their devotion and their prostration before her (Paul did not move a muscle but looked straight before him as she passed), she went down, and crossed the hall and bowed her head very slightly, as if she accepted what they could not say: their tribute to her beauty. (Woolf, 72)

This excerpt is indicative of the stateliness, confidence and control which Mrs Ramsay aimed to exude during her interaction with people. It is evident that she perceives herself as being in charge or in command of the situation and in this sense strives to present herself as the liberated woman in a patriarchal society. The image of her "like a queen" is extended and reaches a climax when she "takes her place at the head of the table" (73) and takes complete control of the situation by directing the guests to their respective seats.

Although she tries to project an image of being in control, she is fully aware of her role as a wife and mother and even though she is verbally abused by her husband at times when he, for example, says "damn you" or when he flings plates around or bangs doors, she does not openly indicate that she is discontented with his behaviour. She accepts his remonstrations and abusive behaviour thereby demonstrating her inability to take charge of her married life. Her fear was manifested in the small daily things that she tried to hide from him by

not "being able to tell him the truth" (34) and by not informing him about the leaking greenhouse roof and the fact that his last book was not his best one.

Multiple perspectives

An analysis of the free direct speech indicates that it examines multiple perspectives since not only one protagonist's consciousness is rendered, but many others, with frequent shifts from one to the other. Woolf uses multiple perspectives to infuse life into her characters. The use of multiple perspectives is a significant technique in modernist writing as it enables the readers to construct character sketches of the protagonists on the basis of what is embedded in their own psyches and how other characters perceive them. According to Auerbach (117) the multiplicity of persons suggest that we are confronted with an endeavour to investigate an objective reality namely Mrs Ramsay. Virginia Woolf aims to approach Mrs Ramsay from as many perspectives as possible using a variety of consciousness in order to enable the readers to understand who she really is.

In *To the Lighthouse* you have an omniscient narrator who is able to control all the characters and who gives life to them. In the psyche of Lily Briscoe, for example, Mrs Ramsay is described as follows:

She was like a bird for speed, an arrow for directness She was willful; she was commanding (42).

These lines together with the impressions which other characters have of her in the novel as a whole contribute towards our understanding of the chief protagonists as we try to make sense of what arises in the consciousness of the various characters. Lily is not only impressed with Mrs Ramsay as a pillar of wisdom and knowledge, but is also infatuated with her and desires an intimate relationship with her.

Although Mrs Ramsay exudes an air of confidence and tries to project the image that she is an independent, enlightened woman, she is trapped in old fashioned, archaic and conservative thinking. This manifests itself most vividly when she embarks on a matchmaking exercise as she believes that

marriage is imperative. Consequently her obsession with marriage spurs her on to bring Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley together and simultaneously to encourage Lily Briscoe to consider having a relationship with Mr Banks. The former liaison does lead to marriage but ends in divorce whilst the latter one does not materialise because Lily Briscoe, as the liberated woman, has other priorities in life rather than marriage. In this regard Lily Briscoe reflects most vividly on Mrs Ramsay's views on marriage in the following manner:

...But still always laughing, insist that she (Lily) must, Minta must, they all must marry, since in the whole world, whatever laurels might be tossed to her, or triumphs won by her, there could be no disputing this; an unmarried woman has missed the best of life (43).

This excerpt illustrates quite explicitly how Woolf uses free indirect speech and merges it into Lily's psyche. Initially when one reads the lines it appears as if Mrs Ramsay is addressing Lily directly, but on closer analysis however it is actually Mrs Ramsay's "voice" in Lily's psyche. It is like an echo in her mind and as she paints, she reflects on the conversation which she had with Mrs Ramsay relating to marriage. Lily Briscoe however does not share her sentiments on marriage as she has other interests in her life such as her father, her home and her painting. Lily articulates her sense of independence and liberation from traditional views as follows:

...gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that...(43)

It is clear that Lily values her independence and prefers to make her own decisions in life rather than being told what to do by someone else. In this sense then whilst Mrs Ramsay represents the voice of traditionalism Lily represents the voice of the newly emerging independent woman who does not need to be married to be happy. Hence in this way Woolf expatiates on the gender ambiguous roles in the

novel as a whole. In her assessment of Mrs Ramsay's viewpoints in her psyche Lily comes to the conclusion that it is ludicrous for Mrs Ramsay to preside over "destinies which she completely failed to understand" (43). Lily's revelation of her inner feelings, which she does not openly express to Mrs Ramsay is indicative of another perspective on the issue of marriage which differs significantly from Mrs Ramsay's viewpoints.

Mrs Ramsay's notion of marriage is a very superficial transaction that lacks depth. This accounts for the fact that she is able to remain married to a man who has very little respect for her and whose obsession with his books and studies draws him even further away from their failing relationship. This triteness is highlighted most vividly in the following scene when she sees William Banks and Lily Briscoe strolling along:

Ah, but was that not Lily Briscoe strolling along with William Banks? She focused her shortsighted eyes upon the backs of the retreating couple. Yes, indeed it was. Did that not mean that they would marry? Yes, it must! What an admirable idea! They must marry! (62)

The word "shortsighted" in this context does not only refer to her limited vision in a literal sense, but also to her lack of understanding about what a relationship between two people really entails. The clinical manner in which she pairs them off highlights her misunderstanding of the essence of relationships which should be based on love and trust before marriage. Yet in her mind's eye if two people of the opposite sex are engaged in conversation they are preparing for marriage. This is indicative of her narrow minded vision of relationships and her obsession with marriage for the sake of marriage, and for no other reason. This obsession is extended even further when she describes William Banks as a poor man who has no wife and children and who has to dine alone in his lodgings. She exhibits immense sympathy for him without considering that he may be perfectly satisfied with his life as it is.

Although Mrs Ramsay vigorously promotes matrimony as the purpose for our existence on

earth, her marriage appears to be a rather superficial and mundane one. Spivak (1987), in her analysis of Mrs Ramsay's views on marriage, contends that in spite of the fact that she knows that marriage brings trouble, when she speaks of marriage it is with complete and prophetic optimism. During her interaction with her husband, for example, it is evident that their conversation revolves around the rather ordinary matters in life like Jasper shooting birds, the children's nickname for Mr Tansley and the flowers in the garden. Their relationship appears to be rather strained and a somewhat formal one since she does not really spend as much time with him as she would like to because he prefers his moments of solitude. However, on occasions when she and Mr Ramsay do speak to each other or read together, their paths do not cross.

If she was really happy with her husband and her marriage she would not have entertained the following thoughts about "boobies" with specific reference to Paul in this context:

Really, she sometimes thought she liked the boobies best. They did not bother one with their dissertations. How much they missed, after all, these very clever men! How dried up they did become, to be sure (88).

It is evident from this excerpt that she preferred Paul's company to Mr Tansley's or even her husband's for that matter because he was a down to earth fellow without any pretensions about himself and his intellectual ability. She was not inclined towards the academic world with its dissertations and intellectual debate, but to more mundane matters that was in keeping with her own level of intelligence. The intellectual discussions tended to bog her down. Her superficiality is extended even further in her thoughts when she hears about Paul's forthcoming marriage to Minta:

How extraordinarily lucky Minta is! She is marrying a man who has a gold watch in a wash-leather bag (103).

Her obsession with the gold watch in the wash-leather bag appears to be quite ludicrous but highlights the mediocre concerns which preoccupy her thoughts. This obsession is reinforced when she

re-echoes her sentiments about the issue again at a later stage as follows:

...(how lucky to marry a man with a wash-leather bag for his watch)(104).

Although at times she is able to exert her authority and commands respect and admiration, her thinking here reflects her rather superficial nature. She would not have entertained such absurd notions if she was a happily married woman. It is at times like these that Mrs Ramsay reveals the ambiguity in her character. On one level she is forceful and determined whilst on another level she indulges in voyeurism to escape from the constraints of her own marriage. It is ironic that she should motivate Paul to ask Minta's hand in marriage and then in her psyche uphold him as the ideal man whom she would have preferred to her husband. She does not spell this out directly but the implication is inherent in her observations and by her somewhat farcical comments.

Mrs Ramsay encourages Paul Rayley to propose to Minta Doyle which he is able to do in spite of his inhibitions. Paul, in reflecting on what he has accomplished, is visibly elated and feels indebted to Mrs Ramsay for encouraging him to ask Minta for her hand in marriage. This insight in Paul's psyche provides us with yet another perspective on marriage. Whilst he is thankful to Mrs Ramsay for encouraging him to get married, Lily rejects the notion completely while Mrs Ramsay attaches tremendous value to marriage and feels that it is of paramount importance in life. Thus the insights into the psyches of the various characters representing multiple perspectives enables the reader to have a better understanding of the gender ambiguous roles of the female protagonists in *To the Lighthouse*. Paul articulates his indebtedness to Mrs Ramsay as follows:

It had been far and away the worst moment of his life when he asked Minta to marry him. He would go straight to Mrs Ramsay, because he felt somehow that she was the person that made him do it. She had made him think he could do anything. Nobody else took him seriously.

But she made him believe that he could do whatever he wanted (68).

These lines capture Mrs Ramsay's ability to motivate the youth to do what she perceives is the right thing to do. This is indicative of the influence that Mrs Ramsay is able to exert on a number of the characters. She is however unable to wield any influence over her husband, who in his role as the patriarch, is far more powerful than she could ever hope to be. Consequently she uses her latent energy to try to persuade others to take decisions that she considers to be of fundamental importance to their own stability in life. The three excerpts on the issue of marriage raised by Mrs Ramsay are indicative of the multiple perspectives which Woolf so effectively incorporates into her novel in her quest to use the stream of consciousness technique so that we have immediate and instantaneous access to the psyches of the characters as the novel unfolds.

Although Lily does not approve of Mrs Ramsay's notion of marriage, she perceives her in a very positive light in terms of the way she projects herself as a woman. Lily sums up Mrs Ramsay's attitude towards men as follows:

...for that was true of Mrs Ramsay – she pitied men always as if they lacked something- women never, as if they had something...(75).

This viewpoint captures another angle of Mrs Ramsay's character from Lily's perspective. This indicates that in spite of Mrs Ramsay's conservative views on marriage, she elevates the status of women in the patriarchal society in which she finds herself. This is yet another example of the technique of multiple perspectives employed by Woolf in order to enable us to have a better understanding of the protagonist and the views that she holds in society at large.

In an analysis of the polyphonic voices that represent the multiple perspectives it is evident that all the characters with the exception of Mr Carmichael have a high regard for Mrs Ramsay. Although she is unable to influence her husband to acquiesce to her desires, she leaves a lasting impression on the other male guests as well as Lily

Briscoe. They strive to please her and are appreciative of her presence and her advice. Mr Tansley, for example, wished he could think of something to say to Mrs Ramsay which would indicate to her that he was not just a dry prig. According to Auerbach (118) in this regard the design of a close approach to objective reality by means of numerous subjective impressions received by various individuals (and at various times) forms an integral part of the modernist technique as espoused by Virginia Woolf.

Mrs Ramsay's strength of character is fleshed out even further by Lily as follows:

There was something frightening about her. She was irresistible. Always she got her own way in the end, Lily thought (89).

It is through Lily Briscoe's eyes that we are able to create the most comprehensive image of Mrs Ramsay as she had the closest attachment to her. In the third part of the novel (The Lighthouse) Lily Briscoe reminisces about Mrs Ramsay and although she tries to obliterate her from her mind, she is unable to do so and is overcome with grief.

Lily, the other major protagonist in the novel, is not as goal directed as Mrs Ramsay and is unable to finish her painting in the first part of the novel. However, after an absence of ten years when she returns to the house, she strives to complete the painting and is eventually successful. As a liberated woman, interested in art she also wants to disprove Mr Tansley's view that women "can't paint" and "write" (42). Lily's struggle for expression is inhibited by amongst others Charles Tansley's "Women can't write, women can't paint" which saps the power of her ego and wastes her creative energy; Mr Ramsay's sucking at women for sympathy; Mrs Ramsay's determination that Lily must marry and that the single life of a woman is an impairment. All these according to Davies (17) represent "a forcefield of internalised pressures against which Lily's modest but genuine gift must self-consumingly struggle for survival."

At the very outset when Lily requests to do the painting Mrs Ramsay is drawn to her because of the sense of independence which she exhibits. The

two feminine protagonists are drawn together because both are striving for a sense of independence in a male dominated society. An analysis of their respective perspectives reveals the admiration which they have for each other as embedded in their psyche. Whilst Lily desires to have an intimate relationship with Mrs Ramsay she admires her (Lily) for exerting herself and rekindling her spirit in her painting which was still a very male dominated past time during that era. She articulates this admiration for Lily as follows:

There was in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared (91).

In this excerpt Mrs Ramsay is alluding to Lily's free-spirited nature which enabled her to exert her authority in a male dominated society. Mrs Ramsay admires this trait in her because she sees something of Lily within herself. She does realise however that a liberated woman, like Lily, is bound to encounter problems with men in society as they expect women to be subservient and submissive and to be engaged in activities associated with housewives like cooking and sewing and not painting and music. Thus Davies (1989, 32) contends that as a character moves around the compass of his world, so the play of his searchlight changes; and all the characters move round fractionally in discrepant ways in relation to him/her.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is evident from the foregoing discussion that Woolf's gender ambiguous protagonists in *To the Lighthouse* namely Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe try to reform their worlds according to their enlightened ideas, their fidelity to the complex truths of their perceptions and their connectedness to the culturally alternative truths of the psyche. In her quest to highlight these issues Woolf uses free indirect speech and multiple perspectives effectively as part of her stream of consciousness technique. This approach enables the reader to not only penetrate into the psyche of the characters but to move from one character's psyche to another in order to reach the objective truth. Like all the Modernists, Virginia Woolf saw art as the only

remaining avenue to truth, meaning, value and transcendence in the otherwise bankrupt twentieth century (Dekoven, 1999, 187).

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