

## FILLING IN THE BLANKS: PERCEIVING SPACE THROUGH GENDER IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "THE MARK ON THE WALL"

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### ABSTRACT

*Recognized as one of the major figures of modern literature, Woolf is highly regarded both for her innovative fiction techniques and insightful contributions to literary criticism. In her short fiction, she explored such themes as the elusive nature of storytelling and character study, the nature of truth and reality, and the role of women in society. Like her novels, these highly individualized, stylistic works are noted for their subjective explorations and detailed poetic narratives that capture ordinary experience while depicting the workings and perceptions of the human mind. Written in an elliptical and impressionistic style, Woolf's brief, apparently plotless stories are considered to have significantly influenced the development of modern short fiction. In "Mark on the Wall", Woolf employs interior monologue to impart the musings of a narrator who, in speculating about a small detail on a wall, ponders a variety of topics, including personal reminiscence, history, and nature. Every rumination returns to the mark only to stray anew into reverie, as each of the narrator's seemingly meandering thoughts builds upon one another to create an intricate discourse on the nature of reality and truth. Much scholarship has been devoted to exploring Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall", yet the text continues to reveal layers of meaning and resonance to yet another generation. This study seeks to interrogate the nature, function, and interpretation of space in relation to Woolf's feminist stance and to \_ quoting Lefebvre's remark \_ Woolf's use of an acute sensitivity to show the subtle richness of everyday life.*

**Key words:** Virginia Woolf, short fiction, feminism, gender, everyday life, space

### INTRODUCTION

Recognized as one of the major figures of modern literature, Woolf is highly regarded both for her innovative fiction techniques and insightful contributions to literary criticism. In her short fiction, she explored such themes as the elusive nature of storytelling and character study, the nature of truth and reality, and the role of women in society. Like her novels, these highly individualized, stylistic works are noted for their subjective explorations and detailed poetic narratives that capture ordinary experience while depicting the workings and perceptions of the human mind. Written in an elliptical and impressionistic style, Woolf's brief, apparently plotless stories are considered to have significantly influenced the development of modern short fiction.

In "Mark on the Wall", Woolf employs interior monologue to impart the musings of a narrator who, in speculating about a small detail on a wall, ponders a variety of topics, including personal reminiscence, history, and nature. Every rumination returns to the mark only to stray anew into reverie, as each of the narrator's seemingly meandering thoughts builds upon one another to create an intricate discourse on the nature of reality and truth.

Much scholarship has been devoted to exploring Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall", yet the text continues to reveal layers of meaning and resonance to yet another generation. This study seeks to interrogate the nature, function, and interpretation of space in relation to Woolf's feminist stance and to \_ quoting Lefebvre's remark \_ Woolf's use of an acute sensitivity to show the subtle richness of everyday life.

In his *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Edward W Soja states that

Space still tends to be treated as fixed, dead, undialectical; time as richness, life, dialectic, the revealing context for critical social theorization. ... But from these confrontational polemics is also arising something else, a more flexible and balanced critical theory that reentwines the making of history with the social production of space, with the construction and configuration of human geographies. New possibilities are being generated from this creative commingling, possibilities for a simultaneously historical and geographical materialism; a triple dialectic of space, time, and social being; a transformative retheorization of the relations between history, geography, and modernity. (1994: 11-12)

The notion of space as implemented in Woolf "the Mark on the Wall" illustrates the relation between history, modernity and space through the perspective of gender Woolf adapts in her story. Spaces "explained a great deal" (1985: 124), Woolf argues. Spaces have reminiscent power. They could unravel a great deal of both private life and fictional worlds. Hence, it is suggested that Woolf's internal spaces often act as quintessence, prompts and precursors. Similarly, it is equally important to show how Woolf explores the potential of everyday experience as a site of personal meaning, social understanding, and ethical value. Through a reading of Woolf's literary representations of a subject's engagement with ordinary things like a mark on the wall, a table, or a colour that layers of meaning are provided.

The other important factor much related to the unique world Woolf presents in her story, is the feminist stance of the protagonist. It becomes not difficult to argue that "The Mark on the Wall" is a story that foregrounds Woolf's feminist position: her indictment of the Great War, Victorian conformism, and the male notion of order.

Critics have examined Woolf's story in the light of various philosophical, modernist or scientific traditions, stressing Woolf's innovative treatment of time, space, plot, or stream-of-consciousness narrative style. S. P. Rosenbaum, for instance, states that the story is about the philosophical "interrelations of thought and external reality, of consciousness and the objects of consciousness". (1971:324) Rachel Blau DuPlessis supposes that this modernist story tries to "distance the reader from codes of expected narrative and from patterns of response that had seemed to command universal or natural status". (1985:20) James Naremore (1973:59) notes that Woolf wants to paint "a sketch in which the protagonist indulges in what appears to be a Freudian daydream". Citing Einstein's theory of time and space, Wayne Narey, on the other hand, states that "Woolf undertakes the transmutation of a new artistic form, the desire to turn historical fiction into a time/perspective-oriented structure through a motif of light and relativity". (1992: 40)

Hence, my current study draws on feminist cultural criticism as presented in Woolf's text which offers compelling critiques of spatialized gender oppression rooted in traditional Western binaries of place, space, and identity. The work, therefore, contributes to feminist criticisms that seek ways to challenge and redefine restrictive platial and spatial categories of gender and identity. It also joins environmental and geographical discussions interested in advancing place and space as crucial sites of inquiry in literary and cultural analyses. The main contention of this paper is to study Virginia Woolf's story as a revelation to the essential relationship between space, the depiction of the ordinary and the author's feminist politics which reflects a new understanding of a Woolfian conviction that space is not merely emptiness, but rather a network of cultural, social and ideological relations. The construction of the otherwise hybrid notions of space, ordinary life and gender make them rather dependant categories, and need to be consolidated for the better understanding of Woolf's fiction.

The first hint the reader is given about the importance of the narrator's sense of place occurs in the initial paragraph, when she recalls looking at (besides those other things already mentioned) the "burning coals" in her fireplace, and how this sight caused "that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the tower" and the "cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock." This fancy is one that she believes was formed in her childhood, and one with which she is not comfortable (presumably because it reminds her of war). Although she does not explain why the fancy is discomfoting, it is clear that it is when she says, "rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy." For a moment, then, she is able to focus on, and to locate herself by, this "small round mark, black on the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantlepiece."

Gaston Bachelard states that “inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (1958: vii). He equally states that “there is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul. (Bachelard xxxvii) In Bachelard’s analysis of intimate home space, he states that the “household activities...keep vigilant watch over the house, they link its immediate past to its immediate future, they are what maintains it in the security of being” (67). He argues that memory and imagination work dependably in our recollections of space as a structural principle. In addition to Bachelard’s important argument, recent critical works have gone farther to assume the interrelations between culture and space, and to dismiss what Kant has argued that space, in actuality is no more than an emptiness which could be filled with activity. The theory of space has been an important issue to various philosophers and thinkers. Michel Foucault views that space used to be regarded as merely “belonging to ‘nature’ or else it was conceived as the residential state or field of expansion of peoples, of a culture, a language or a state” (1972: 149).<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, however, has claimed that “space is ideological” (1988: 35) stressing the relationship between the lived experience and the architectural. Space become a *text*, in which “a whole range of ‘signs’ and ‘codes’ are combined, whether in the organic unity of a shared code, or in ‘collage’ systems of various kinds” (1988: 36). The most influential space theorist is Henri Lefebvre who considers space as a “social product” (1991: 26). He claims that there some sort of ideology springing up from cultural spaces and consequently cultural meanings are better sketched in any specific space.

It goes without saying that there is ample evidence that Virginia Woolf clearly made the connection between the private and the public: between private experience, cultural history and material conditions in most of her fictional work. In *Three Guineas* (1938), she has demonstrated this: “Within a small space are crowded together St Paul’s, the Bank of England, the Mansion House, the massive if funereal battlements of the Law Courts; and on the other side, Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament” (1998: 176). In Woolf, the connection will always be evident between the domestic and the public; between the outside sphere where the female will be marginalized and the domestic conventionally viewed as a feminine domain.

According to Woolf, men eagerly “set the standard” order. The metaphor of “Whitaker’s Almanack” is used in the story to represent what she later calls “impersonal and impartial authority”, a system that advocates patriarchal prejudice and bigotry against females in the professions. This authoritative voice is responsible for many women’s failure to rise to high positions. However, the narrator also predicts that the war will soon dethrone the patriarchal system, for the war has seriously discredited “Whitaker’s Table of Precedency”—“which has become . . . since the war, half a phantom” to many people (86). Looking forward, the narrator posits that women love to see “the masculine point of view which governs our lives” to be sent “into the dustbin where the phantoms go” (86). In turn, male power, tradition (symbolized by the “mahogany sideboards”), religion (“gods”, “devils”, “hell”), aristocratic art (“Landseer prints”) may all disappear, leaving women with an “intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom, if freedom exists. . . .” (86).

Since a deliberate exclusion is practiced on the female, the interior space, Woolf stresses, would be the natural domain where she could secure material sovereignty and the space where she could exercise autonomy and freedom. Outside, she is alienated and excluded.

In order to domesticate the interior space to be private domain, the need for the ordinary springs up. While the ‘everyday’ is the term most commonly employed in cultural studies and cultural theory at the present time, Woolf uses the word ‘ordinary’ with much more frequency. In her valuable work on Woolf treatment of “the everyday” Lorraine Sim (2010, 16) states that:

Woolf’s preoccupation with the ordinary signals her keen interest in things (material objects both natural and human-made), in addition to daily experiences and behaviours. Also, the everyday implies a degree of repetition and, potentially, monotony which is not an implicit aspect of the ordinary. Something can be ordinary without being every day. For example, illness, celebrations and falling in love are a part of ordinary experience and life but are not typically a part of everybody’s everyday life.

Woolf feels that the place of a woman is only and restricted to a culture sketched by set only by a masculine dominated culture. Hence she finds it imperative to resist and challenge the source of oppression by defying the coded modes of behaviour and ideologies which patriarchy has designed for

women as obedient subjects. The question goes beyond a process of rejecting a patriarchal gender role by challenging the supremacy of male dominance in culture formation. However, it is not merely the revelation of one person's mind, as it also reveals the collective mentality and ethos of England at a crucial time in its history — that is, during World War I. Indeed, the time during which this story takes place is essential to understanding its central conflict, and this, again, concerns the narrator's state of mind.

In 1917, Britain, like most of the other European countries became engaged in war. It, also like the other countries, is ruled by men, “men of action — men, we assume, who don't think.” However, the narrator does think about and question “the mark” these men are leaving on the wall of the thinking person's mind. Thus, Virginia Woolf bases her story on Plato's allegory of the cave, which describes — in Socrates' words — humans chained to one wall in such a way that they are prevented from looking in any direction other than straight ahead at the cave wall in front of them; on this wall are shadows of stick figures cast from behind the wall to which the humans are bound. Shadows, then, are all that these prototypical humans know as reality. Even so, Socrates says, if one of these people is set free, taken out of the cave and shown the world of light and three dimensional forms, and if — after discovering that what he thought was real in the cave was only shadows — he returns to tell the other people that what they think is reality is insubstantial, then the others would kill him if they could. (David A. Carpenter, 2004: 1-3)

Like Plato's allegory, Woolf's story concerns the nature of truth, justice, and wisdom. In like manner, as Plato believed that truth consists of ideas that can be approached only through systematic thinking, Woolf's narrator thinks about the mark on the wall — thinks, that is, about the nature of reality and self. What she discovers is threatening to her existence because it goes against the grain of a table of precedence and what it (“the masculine point of view”) points to as the “real standard things.” This is why Woolf introduces the second character into the story at the end, as this is a person who believes in action and who is — unlike the narrator — bored because “nothing ever happens.” Such a person serves as a foil, illustrating the profound difference between those people who live by the dictates of external facts (“a snail on our wall”) and precedents, and those individuals who save themselves and their visions of a better, healthier life than a table of precedence offers a society.

In “The Mark on the Wall”, a need arises that stems from the same place of female oppression, the private sphere of the domestic and from the privacy of a living room. The contemplative female pondering about the nature of the mark on the wall while being engaged in smoking: “I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time” (1985: 83). The mark, trivial as it is, calls for the more serious issues at stake. The absence of a possible understanding to its meaning is going to call upon the absence of fair public role for the long oppressed figure of women who remains “unclassified”:

There is no mark on the wall to measure the precise height of women. There are no yard measures, neatly divided into the fractions of an inch, that one can lay against the qualities of a good mother or the devotion of a daughter, or the fidelity of a sister, or the capacity of a housekeeper. Few women even now have been graded at the universities; the great trials of the professions, army and navy, trade, politics and diplomacy have hardly tested them. They remain even at this moment unclassified. (1998: 111)

In her lecture to the National Society for Women's Service of 1931 —published posthumously as “Professions for Women” in *The Death of the Moth* (1942)— Woolf shed light on her own experience in the struggle towards self-emancipation. The first obstacle to overcome, Woolf told her audience, was to exorcise the ghostly Angel in the House in her: the detachment from the model of femininity with which she was forced to identify as a sympathetic, charming, unselfish and pure being. The identification with that particular image of womanliness was performed on behalf of a particular gaze that enforced it and to which enjoyment was offered in sacrifice: “She [the ‘Angel in the House’] was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others” (Woolf 1993: 102). In reference to feminine charm in her essay “Two Women” (1927), Woolf spoke of “the curious spectacle [...] of grave and busy women doing fancy work and playing croquet in order that the male eye might be gratified and deceived” (2008a: 117).

Precluding the expression and realization of women's desires and aspirations to occupy relevant positions in a transformed social configuration resulting from their subjective agency, this interconnection of women's image and its regulating male gaze must be dismantled through subversion. If the image is abandoned as the source of identity, then the power of the gaze is undermined. If the patterns of thought and conduct prescribed as 'naturally' feminine are openly held to be unsatisfactory and oppressive and women promote an exploration of new modes of self-representation and agency, then the masculine image (reflected in the passive gaze of women as naturally inferior beings) would be blurred and patriarchy's safe position of domination could be effectively contested. And it is not just women's liberation from tyranny that is at stake, it is also men's enslavement to patriarchal desire to dominate as reflected in the gaze of women. Modern literature differs from pre-modern literature for it destabilizes narratives. From Shakespeare to the Romantic period, (male) literature is characterized by the mimetic style (the symbol of the "looking glass"), linguistic essentialism (the search for the "name" of the flower), the transcendental vision (the symbol of the "romantic figure with the green of forest depths"). However, modern literature is different. In the context of Woolf's fiction, the smashing of the "looking-glass" can carry two meanings: on the one hand, modern literature has decided to tear itself apart from the illusion of realism, hence "the looking glass smashes" and "the image disappears" (85). On the other hand, it also marks the beginning of feminist literature, for Woolf prefers to use the metaphor of "the looking-glass" to describe women's victimized state. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf states that Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. . . . For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. (31)

In order for a woman to challenge the Angel in the House, to resist the dominant, controlling male gaze, it is necessary simultaneously to become aware that the paternal, dominating gaze on behalf of which she is enacting that role does primarily reside within herself and so be in a position to free herself from its hold. And, of course, the fact that the narrator's gender is never clearly specified in the text is by no means an irrelevant fact, but rather a conscious textual strategy. The negative self-definition at one point would fit that given of herself by a consciously and intentionally negligent housewife: "It [the mark on the wall] may even be caused by some round black substance, such as a small rose leaf, left over from the summer, and *I, not being a very vigilant housekeeper —look at the dust on the mantelpiece*, for example, the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation, as one can believe" (Woolf 1985: 84; italics added). The voice which closes the narrative fits the place of the man of this fictional household better: he makes his entrance "standing over" the narrator, is about to go out to "buy a newspaper," is exasperated by the paralyzing effect of the war in the normal course of public events, and asks in a sarcastic manner "why we should have a snail on our wall" (Woolf 1985: 89). His expression of contained anger concerning the presence of a snail we take to be a reproach addressed to the narrator for her negligent housekeeping.

Three years after the publication of "The Mark on the Wall", Woolf produced another essay "Men and Women" (1920) that revolved around the same notions: specifically women's invisibility as subjects throughout the ages, overshadowed by the deeds of unconvinced "men of action": even the most famous heroines in novels "represent what men desire in women, but not necessarily what women are in themselves" (2008a: 19). (Romero & Rodríguez, 2006: 100-103)

"The Mark on the Wall" poses the question that literature is a female domain; another place for the female, and its practice an equalizing experience. The living room, the traditional site of pacifying domestic homeostasis, turns into its obverse: a space of subversion in which a subjective narrative perspective is compulsively engaged in exposing and throwing into disarray the assumed consistency of the dominant modes of viewing and representing reality, the values that they entail, and the subject-positions that they enforce as normal, natural ones.

Among all the items of everyday life with the conventional living-room, the mark on the wall becomes the most significant object in spite of its odd nature, which challenges logic and credibility. The black blot is the narrator's sole focus of attention as well as the point of inception of her subversive

thoughts. This indeterminate, meaningless stain “about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece” haunts the mind of the narrator to the point of upsetting the chronological distinction between past and present upon which traditional plots were outlined.

The story closes with the echo of the unequivocal statement made by the other voice heard in the narrative concerning the nature of the mark on the wall: “Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail”.

“The Mark on the Wall” represents Woolf’s place of resistance against dogmatic set of rules and values as embodied by Whitaker’s table. The story works on the innovative energy of long-termed gendered space, the living-room, which Woolf has always considered as being culturally and ideologically decided by patriarchy.

In the Mark on the Wall, the traditionally female gendered space of the living room becomes a text entirely composed of objects that are culturally and ideologically charged, which work therefore as signs and codes that the narrator reinterprets and reformulates in a subversive aesthetics of resistance.

At a particular point within the story, the narrator makes the remark how of how “dull” fiction is which gives the reader only an external description of a given character; if “only that shell of a person . . . is seen by other people,” then the world will be made to seem “airless, shallow, [and] bald.” No, she says, people are more than one-dimensional shells, and “the novelists in the future will realize more and more the importance of . . . reflections [as those seen in mirrors], for of course there is not one reflection but almost infinite numbers; those are the depths they will explore . . . leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories.” By “reality” here Woolf means that which is external to a character’s inner self.

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