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MEMORY AND TIME IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "ORLANDO"

Abstract

The paper explores the major theme of Modernistic literature, namely time. The topic is examined through Virginia Woolf's distinguished novel 'Orlando'. The paper aims to show that the novel is unconventional not only due to its revolutionary narrative form but also because of its tremendous interest in time. The main goal is to emphasize the memory and time in the novel and their connection to the twentieth-century views on time.

The key message is that Virginia Woolf creates the hero, Orlando who is given 300 years to live, therefore she challenges the bonds of time by gifting its hero supernatural length of life. Another striking fact which is given attention is that the main hero does not follow the Newtonian, objective time, his existence does not follow the clock time, but rather the psychological time. How does the main hero do it? With the use of memory. Memory in "Orlando" is divided into two branches, voluntary and involuntary, the latter I suggest should be broken down into two independent types. Into outdated past and the moments of being. The main objective of the paper is to conclude that Virginia Woolf's novel Orlando is, in fact, the representation of the ideas spread by Henry Bergson and Michel Serres. They deny the objective time and establish the notion of the subjective, psychological time where there is the duration of the moment and where the present is progressive.

Key Words: Psychological time, Moments of being, Outdated past, Duration.

Introduction

Human is a timely creature and it is not at the same time. Because of this, human always faces the problem of the dual nature of its existence. What is more real: what we are thinking about or what we can touch or see right now?

The establishment of the idea of linearity of time is linked with the invention of the mechanic clock. This in its turn influenced world enormously. In the 20th century, the issue of time fell under the spotlight of every field. Literature was not an exception. XX century writers began to alter the understanding of time, they have defaced the conventional time. It is a well-known fact that literature is always strictly connected to the external factors and therefore social-political trends are always drenched in modest proportions. It will be no exaggeration if we say that XX century expressed itself with the alteration of temporality.

Henry Bergson was one of the pioneers who expressed that physiological time is not a different type of time but it is the different perception of it. Physiological time does not follow the rules of chronology and linearity. It is interested in memory expectations, duration, and the intensity of the emotion, the redemption of reality, freedom of associations. As professor Manana Gelashvili notes in her book “the problem of time in Modernistic literature”, showing so-called “frozen moment” is a method for displaying spatiality by means of rejecting linearity. Astronomical period of time can become immensely big in the minds of human just as one single moment can realize and contain the whole life in itself. T.S Eliot rightly notes that:

“to be conscious is not to be in time” [Burnt Norton];

Probably meaning that time is abolished from the moment human opposes the eternity. Thoughts, feelings, emotions are beyond time, their intensity is not conquered by the tick-tock of the Clock.

This change influenced the way in which novels were narrated, their style shifted from conventional to the escape from conventional. “Time is a means of narration’ Professor Manana Gelashvili mentioned the words of Thomas Mann in her book. This quote is relevant to Virginia Woolf as in her novels, time indeed becomes the particular manner of narration.

Memory in Orlando

Woolf is obsessed with one-person story description. All of her novels are developed around a particular character’s life. There are occasions when one character is even divided into several personalities and is seen from different perspectives. (As it happens in “Waves”). “Orlando” is not an exception. It is one hero story and it is an autobiography. As in all literary works, Orlando is built on partly real facts and representation of real people. Woolf never denied this and in fact, in her

diaries, she openly says that the main hero of the book ‘Orlando’ is the prototype of Vita Sackville West:

“... One of these days though I shall sketch here like the grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends... it might be a way of writing the memories of one’s own times during people’s lifetimes. It might be the most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando a young nobleman...it should be truthful but fantastic (Diary, 3, 156-57);

Moreover, Woolf at the beginning of Orlando, notes that the book is dedicated to Vita Sackville West.

Novel is experimental in every aspect: in what is described-the content and in how it is described- the form. The novel is fiction, describing the hero, who was luckily given a huge amount of time to live, in particular, 300 years. This clearly demonstrates that Woolf attacks time.

Although there are numerous autobiographical novels in a literary world, it would be fair if we say that still, Virginia Woolf is the only author, who reveals such an intense interest towards writing the biography. She has written two biographies, none of them conventional. ‘‘The moments of being’’, the depiction of her own life, is the vivid example, of what she thought biography should be. Here she discloses her ideas about seeing people’s lives from different perspectives and the struggle to depict life on the papers. What we read in the ‘‘moments of being’’ is probably the foundation for the novel Orlando, at least we can say that her beliefs on how the person, who is not an objective ‘‘one thing’’, but rather ‘‘rainbow like’’ creature, can be described in words, in a story, in a book, in a novel.

Biography as it is defined by the Cambridge dictionary, is the story of a person, written by another person. Woolf thinks it is impossible to describe a person, no matter how accurate facts, the person on the paper and the real one, can not be the same:

“...on the one hand there is the truth, on the other is personality, And if we think of truth as something of granite-like, solidarity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it’’ (New biography);

Woolf also mentions that it is very questionable who deserves the biography and who does not. In other words, do we have the history of winners, when the majority of the population are not the winners? It is

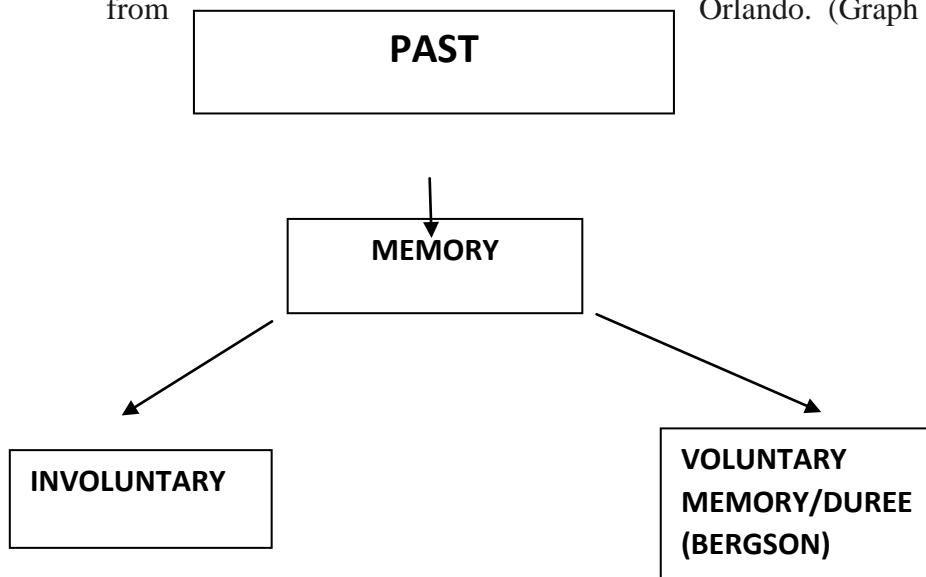
a very sensitive issue, therefore Woolf suggested fictional biography of Orlando, where she discusses her ideas about memory, time and identity.

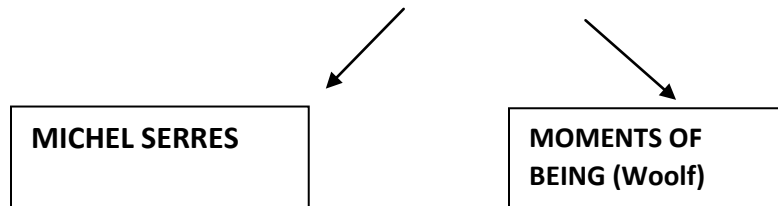
The key message of Virginia Woolf is similar to Henry Bergson's ideas on the time and memory, they both emphasize that memories do not stand hand in hand with the dates they happened in, but vice versa, they appear in front of us, only by means of their emotional intensity.

As I mentioned above the transformation of conventional Biography is one of the main targets for writing "Orlando". Woolf's style is a revolt against both: history and linear development of events. As Maria Di Batista puts it, the novel is a joke on History. The reader only understands this when finishes the book, "Orlando" ends on October 11, 1928. This has a symbolic meaning because, on this date, the book was published. The end of the book is, in fact, its beginning, the day when "Orlando" as a novel has started its life "sui generis".

Time in Orlando

The fact that Orlando is a biography does underline the importance of time past, which according to the novel is a representation of memory collections. I suggest the following division of these memories. They can be split into two major types: involuntary and voluntary memories. Voluntary memory can be linked to Bergsonian *durée* and further broken down in two: one discussed by French philosopher Michel Serres, and another so-called "Moments of being" by Virginia Woolf. Below I will discuss each of these elements separately and connect it to the examples from Orlando. (Graph 1.)





Involuntary memory is a type of memory. In “involuntary autobiographical memories” (Cambridge Press 2009) this phenomenon is described as follows:

“ Fortunately, our memory is not just driven by conscious goals and commitments to remember. Often memories of past events come to mind in a manner that is completely unexpected and involuntary. They come with no preceding decision to remember, with no plans and no commitment. They may suddenly pop up in response to stimuli in our environment or aspects of our current thought. A piece of music accidentally heard on the radio may stir an image of a moment in the past that we feel we have not thought about for years, or at least for a while”.

In Orlando there are passages where we can clearly see the representation of involuntary memory. Moreover, this phenomenon is compared to a seamstress:

“ Memory is the seamstress and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus the most ordinary movement in the world such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards once may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting...” (Orlando, 72);

From this passage we see that Orlando endures centuries and still remembers the past. He often experiences the flashes of involuntary memory. The events that happen in present, affect her and she recalls the past catastrophes. Namely, during the reign of King James I, while walking through the streets of London, she remembers the harsh winter of 1708-09.

Another example of involuntary memory can be seen in the passage where Orlando is offered a ham. When Orlando tastes ham he experiences the pleasant sensational moment and he sees the image of her beloved Sasha, skiing on the ice, the women she loved so dearly nearly a century ago.

Another type of memory that can be recognized in the novel is intentional, or voluntary memory. I use this term as a synonym for emotional/psychological memory. Human existence in this world is always linked to experiences. This way, we can divide the whole life into segments of different experiences. However, each experience does not have the same value and the human mind only keeps particular ones. French philosopher Henry Bergson in his book "Time and Free will", 1913 explores the process of remembering, he explains that mind mostly pays attention to certain experiences that had high emotional intensity. It opposes the traditional understanding of time, in other words, humans do not experience clock time. Instead, they live by psychological time:

"But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality has no such effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length, on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second, this extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known and deserves a fuller investigation. (Orlando, 1928-72).

Virginia Woolf in the second chapter describes the life of Orlando, she says that he used to leave home being a man of thirty and used to return back a man of fifty-five at least. What nonsense, one might think, but if we think deeper, this is exactly what Bergson implies when he classifies the experiences. Woolf wanted to say that, there were times when Orlando was as joyful as 30 years old one can be and there were times when he felt at 55. At the end of this paragraph, Woolf says:

"Altogether, the task of estimating the length of human life ...is beyond our capacity" (Orlando, 1928-73);

As I mentioned above, psychological time is presented by two forms in Orlando, One resembles Michel Serres outdated past, and the other one is more linked to Woolf's "moments of being". Both of them, to my mind, are representations of Bergsonian *durée*. Now I will examine them separately.

Woolf's special 'moments of being'

In her unpublished autobiographical writings Virginia Woolf discusses that everyday life is formless and most of our time is spend on non-being. What she means under non-being, is the everyday things that require time and effort but are absolutely not important.

“One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mabel; washing; cooking dinner; bookbinding. When it is a bad day the proportion of non-being is much larger...” (Moments of being)

Woolf says that there are moments in life, which have such a huge impact on our beings that we recall them and return them back on and on. This exceptional moments for her are moments of being.

“...These are three instances of exceptional moments. I often tell them over, or rather they come to the surface unexpectedly.” (Moments of being)

This theme is also reflected in Orlando. Just like in a piece of a classical music, there is a theme, which is one and the same through the work and there is a variation, which is the unique part of the work, the part that is catchy and is best remembered by the audience.

Similar to this, Orlando’s theme is drenched with lots of details that are not even important, but the variation is most of the time the passage from the past, the scene of skating Sasha. Probably because this is Orlando’s moment of being, in this memory, whether it is her or him, Orlando feels the most present.

Outdated past in Orlando

Michel Serres in the second chapter of his dialogue on “Literature, science, philosophy” speaks about time which is outdated. He implies that the past is only transformed into black, empty, already-passed outdated spot, because of our attitude towards it. In reality between what happened and present, there exists progress, and this can be regarded as the birth of a new time. Michel Serres also believes that it is wrong to regard present as the summit out of the chain of events. He opposes the linear understanding of time and the notion of time which is progressive. In his words, it is hard to understand the meaning of self-same time. Serres offers particular time-space, which can be seen in “Orlando”.

For Orlando past is never out-dated, in fact, it is a part of his present existence. In the first chapter, Orlando meets Russian princess Marousha, whom he calls Sasha. There is a scene, where Orlando first saw Sasha, she was skating on the ice, and Orlando could barely distinguish whether it was a man or a woman that enchanted him so much. This lovely scene became the memory that Orlando never abandoned. Not even when he changed sex and became a woman. In the second chapter, heartbroken Orlando leaves for Constantinople, where he goes through lots of different experiences, one morning he awakes and finds himself turned into a woman.

Despite the fact that physically Orlando is transformed from male to female, inside he never abandons himself, in other words, in spite of the change in sex, the memory base remains unaltered.

In the last chapter Woolf almost everywhere demonstrates that time is something that Orlando struggles with. Very often it is mentioned that Orlando tries to ‘sunk beneath the present moment’ (Orlando, 239). Woolf skillfully suggests the passage, in which to connect it with Michael Serres, the present is a progress and is not a summit of Orlando’s life:

‘‘ Omnibus seemed to pile itself upon omnibus and then to jerk itself apart. So the ice blocks had pitched and tossed that day on the Thames... ‘Time has passed over me’ she thought, trying to collect herself.... Nothing is any longer one thing. I take up a handbag and I think of an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice. Someone lights a pink candle and I see a girl in Russian trousers. When I step pit of door-as I do now,’’ here she steps onto the pavement of Oxford Street, ‘what is that I taste? Little herbs. I hear goat bells. I see mountains. Turkey? India? Persia? Her eyes filled with tears.’’.

Conclusions

The paper shows that Virginia Woolf explores memory and time in her novel Orlando. Two types of memory are examined through the novel: voluntary and involuntary memory, and the examples from the novel are linked with the ideas of Philosophers such as Henry Bergson and Michael Serres. We can conclude that Virginia Woolf’s ideas on time and temporality are very similar to the model of ‘‘ duration’’ and ‘‘progressive present’’.

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