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THE ISSUE OF TIME IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S THE
WAVES

Abstract

The article explores the issue of time in Virginia Woolf's most experimental novel "the Waves". Generally, the issue of time is one of the prominent themes in Virginia Woolf's novels, however this one displays different pattern of it, namely instead of presenting Bergsonian "Duration", it shows the difference between the existence of a person and the concept of "being" as something beyond time. There are two directions, in which this issue is explored, first is the portrayal of individual versus collective, in which we see Woolf's characters saying that they do not have "one being" but rather see themselves as the inheritors of the past and the unities of other beings. The second is the nature of eternity. With regards to this, relevant passage from the novel is further explored. In this extraordinary passage, Virginia Woolf thrives towards the cancellation of the time boundaries and the creation of the whole, eternity-like surrounding. All the characters claim that with this unity they overcome their timely existence and unite with the general pattern of being. In the end, the article assumes that Virginia Woolf's "the Waves" is the true fruit of twenty century modernist literature and Woolf successfully manages to portray the spirit of modernistic epoch in its struggle with the time-bound existence.

Key words: Existence, Being, duration, collective, individual, Sein vs dasein;

Introduction

It is well-known fact that twentieth century has been revolutionary in its perception of the world. One of the novelties in this direction was human's perception of time. In contrast to Newtonian time which is self-same and measured by the laws of simple duration, meaning one hour consists of 60 minutes and one minute of 60 seconds, time in 20th century became more subjective and stretched and shrank at the same time.

It is clear that something changed in 20th century and all the disciplines of art reflected it correspondingly. Of course, it has left its trace in the literature too. Actually, it gave birth to the high modernism which cannot be imagined without its shift in the understanding of time. Without the eternity and spatiality perceptions. One of the writers who was concerned with this change was Virginia Woolf. It is regrettable that majority of Woolf's criticism arises either from biographic interests directed at seeing the author or towards exploring feministic sentiments in her works. As Woolf is the author who, like no other, manages to reflect the "Zeitgeist" and to offer unique subjectivity at the same time. My article is an attempt to bring her ideas and her insight on the surface.

As Auden notes in his essay "A Consciousness of Reality" the originality of Virginia Woolf lies in the mere fact that she is obsessed with the trivial things along with the grand ones. She is the writer who loves not only the triumphant moments of life but also finds tiny little bits of pleasure in her surroundings. Auden offers the citation from "the waves": "There is a square: there is an oblong. The Players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated. We are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation". This shows that people can create space from the flat simplicity, therefore it is there triumph. The creation of the space is always about finding the time where your being is attached to the world. This novel shows the problem of time very subtly. Woolf started writing the novel in 1927 and wanted to name it "the moss", however later on she has changed her mind and the title "the waves" was given to the novel in 1931. This was rather a thoughtful change as Woolf really gave a lot of

consideration to the nature of time and wanted to express every little detail of it. The title “the moss” was probably altered because of their behavioral pattern as they do not appear when it is light but only when it is dark. This is controversial and not acceptable to the whole pathos of the novel, Woolf struggles to show life in general and also to reflect how humans are connected with each other with their past and with their future. Therefore, the finding of the title “the Waves” was the perfect breakthrough, as waves are the parts of the bigger entity, the ocean or the sea. They rhythmically raft to the shore and then they step back again – this alone is a neat pattern of the human existence. The fact that the issue of time is central in the novel is also underlined by the absence of the chapters in it. We see the perspectives from the narrations of ten different characters. There are ten interludes in the book.

In each of the interlude we see the description of the different daytime. It all starts with the morning interlude and then the writer presents the characters and the flashes of their childhood, probably for underlining that the morning is the beginning of the day just like the childhood is the first stage of the life. And it continues like that with the midday and mid-aged characters and then, in the end, we don’t have night, just as we do not see how characters grow old. The death is never the ending in the novel, similar to the waves, which never stop and move back and forth eternally, the characters live on too. Only one character, Percival dies, however he still lives on in other characters narrations and we see him throughout the book. The book ends with the exclamation “O death”, which to my mind outlines “in my end is my beginning” pathos.

The novel does not have a central character. It offers six characters, who tell their stories from their perspectives. Woolf steps beyond her loved Bergsonian time portrayal and offers us the pattern in which we can see how past, present and future can be united. Some of the scholars believe that Woolf is indebted from Karl Gustav Jung’s ideas about the connections of individual mind with collective subconscious and their coexistence. Indeed, in every corner of the book, in different narrations we see how characters perceive themselves as the parts or unities of the past.

Methods

This research employs a number of methodological approaches. It is a synthesis of extrinsic and intrinsic methods and along with reception theory, textual method is applied. Due to the fact that it is not possible to determine whether Woolf has ever read Bergson's or St Augustine's philosophical works, I have tried to connect their ideas of time to Woolf's characters understanding of it. Through scrutinizing text, I have tried to come to reasonable interpretation of it and displayed the pattern of time, which Woolf suggests throughout the Waves.

Results

Through textual analyses of "the Waves" it is visible that two types of time experience can be seen: individual and collective. Individual experience almost always tries to link itself with the elements of eternity (characters see themselves as the parts of the past and the future, not as one defined "being"). It can also be assumed that "beyond time existence" is an important theme for Woolf, as in the most controversial passage of the novel the author tries to create the sense of eternity, express general "sein;" instead of "dasein".

Discussions

It should be noted that there is not a systematic research which would further explore the issue of time and its reflections in Woolf's novels, especially in "the Waves". However, it is noteworthy to mention Professor Manana Gelashvili's book "The Problem of Time in Modernist literature" in which she examines subjective Bergsonian time in Woolf's novels. I believe that this issue deserves further attention and systematic approach, given the reality that there are numerous researches where Woolf's works are examined from different angles, especially from feminist narration perspectives.

Individual VS collective

Bernard - one of the main characters of the novel says that he constantly sees how people are melted into each other and are surrounded by the mist, creating the unimportant territories. By saying this, he means that being of a human "into this world" is an eternal comeback, which repeats already existing pattern of being, its structure and its form. Moreover, through the novel Bernard says that people themselves are stories that they try to tell and tell but never ever succeed: "Bernard says there is always a story. I am a story; Louis is a story...Among the tortures and devastations of life is this then-our friends are not able to finish their stories". This probably implies that with just one individual life, nothing ever starts or ends and it is only a little ring of the longer chain. Because of this no one can ever finish the story.

Louis, another character of the novel says: "I hang suspended with our attachments. We are nowhere". What does being nowhere refer to? Of course, he has time in mind. He implies that our attachment with the present moment hampers us from fully feeling the past and the future. He believes that he has already lived "thousand lives" and if he closes his eyes (while actually being in train) he will be able to realize that he is only a ghost of Louis with the ephemeral nature, one more creature who is going to pass too: "Human history is defrauded of a moments vision". Bernard believes that we are not alone, we are not simple and one but complex and many. Another character of the novel Neville also refers the issue of one being, he says that in the world which consists of the present moment why should we single out particular one, why should we discriminate. There are the bells which ring for life, he says. He considers himself to be the poet, he sees how youth passes just like the boats afar and remote trees. He feels melancholy and sadness and he admits that he cannot choose the characteristics which make him - "the him", as he sees fluidity and the flux of life. He says it is very useful when someone remembers friends. But this remembrance is also painful for him, as he thinks that a person cannot and should not be reduced and eventually packed in "one" being. He looks at the historical building and he says that it is unbearable for him to see the people murmuring and moving inside it, because according to him historical buildings withstand all the centuries and stand still for the eternity. Neville says that when a person reads Byron, he underlines the

phrases or the moments which are somehow close to his personality. This way person can one day be Byron and the other – Tolstoy, meaning that individual changes all the time. The whole chain of its existence is the finding and then denying that finding. In the beginning of the novel we see Neville who says that he conjugated the verbs in past participle. This really explains the above given analyses. Neville and Bernard are quite close in the novel, as they both like poetry. And there is a passage in the novel where Neville hands a rhyme to Bernard. Bernard felt like he has been reduced to one being and when Neville left him, there were lines between them he recalls. We are not as simple as our friend believe us to be, we are complex and many- he says.

In another passage Louis says that he has written his name for twenty-one times. To link this with above given judgment, we could assume that this stands as a demonstrative, self-defying act. He is trying to state his name, by saying it over and over again. He regretfully notes that he is evident and clear, and has packed all his other “beings” in one life. He has gone through thousand lives and every day now he digs and buries his being. Louis very well knows that his life is ephemeral and he falls into existential crisis. Just like Bernard says: “There is no stability in this world, who is to say what meaning there is in anything?... To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure”.

The moment as an eternity

“What might have been and what has been, point to one end, which is always present.” This is a citation from T.S Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*. Unlike Woolf, with Eliot, it is quite common to see the mythical time. “*The Waves*” is the novel in which Woolf experiments with mythical time. There is a passage in the novel, which can be seen as the center of the novel to which all the other scenes move to and from which all the rest come out. When Percival, one of the characters of the novel, is about to go to India friends decide to hold the goodbye meeting. They get together in one of the restaurants. This is where we can see Heideggerian famous rift between “sein” and “dasein”, as six different “dasein” meet in a restaurant and create one

whole. Bernard headed to the restaurant contemplates about the nature of the moment and he asks himself, what really is the moment, and then answers:

” What is this moment of time, this particular day in which I found myself caught”. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel, our short progress has been cancelled”. He also says that in reality, humans are naked; it is a lie to cover them with the buttoned clothes. The truth is in their bones and in the silence beneath them. United characters manage to make one whole. All of them with the strength of the shared emotion sink in one moment, turning this moment into eternity. Bernard noted that this strength can be named as the love of Percival, but he also added that this would have been not very accurate description and, in fact, it could have been the narrowing of the true nature of it. Bernard also figuratively explains unity-creation. He says that as they sit around the table, there is a vase in the middle of the table, all six see their perspectives and they make up one whole vase image. The nature of “seven characters” is for him the 360-unity, creating the one. When dinner comes to its end every character tries to stop it from ending. Jinny suggests - let’s stop for one more minute, Louis begs not to let time and the door tear their unity into pieces. Especially Neville says that beyond this meeting there was happiness, he saw the past centuries disobeying the clock which hang over the fireplace and he asks, will this unity endure this? He is afraid that meetings and departures will destroy them in the end; therefore, they must cancel time and the sound of the clock. In this meeting, Susan sees seven days of the week and Bernard adds that whatever has not yet happened is already in it. What should happen and what is beyond time, we have proved its existence while being together- he says. We have proved that we are not mere slaves or sheep going after the shepherd, we are creators too, and we managed to unite with the numerous connections of the past. When we opened the door not into chaos but in to the world, which we can control with our strength, make it lightened and eternal. From this duration and timely existence, they managed to create the unity of what might have been and has been.

conclusions

It should be noted that there are lot more examples in which characters refer to time and this needs to be examined further, however to conclude the article, we can say that it is visible that Woolf uses eternity vs mortal existence opposition. She suggests that humans can not be bound to only “one particular” being in one particular flesh, but they are the parts of broader system and “eternal being”. They are the constituents of the puzzle, which if assembled correctly can disclose the meaningful picture. It is impossible not to see the extraordinary vision and attitude to time in this novel. It was truly revolutionary in the twentieth century and it still is, as today as never, we can see that humans experience time in a very different manner from what clocks tell us.

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