

## James Joyce's Epiphany and Virginia Woolf's "Moment of Importance"

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**Abstract:** In English literature, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are the two best-known novelists of the "stream of consciousness". Joyce's novels are written in accordance with his theory of "epiphanies" and Virginia Woolf's works are characterized by the "moment of importance". Both writing techniques are characteristic of stream of consciousness in modern fiction yet there are some similarities and differences between them. This paper tries to make such a comparison.

**Key words:** Stream of consciousness; Epiphany; Moment of importance

In the late 19th century, the literary device of "interior monologue" arose in France as an application of modern psychological knowledge to literary creation. In the 20th century, under the influence of Freud's theory of psychological analysis, a number of writers adopted a new technique in writing characterized by the "stream of consciousness" marking the appearance of modern fiction which prevailed during the 20s and 30s of the 20th century in English literature. The "stream of consciousness" is a psychological term indicating "the flux of conscious and subconscious thoughts and impressions moving in the mind at any given time independently of the person's will (LIU, 1993).

### 1. CHARACTERISTIC WRITING TECHNIQUES OF MODERN FICTION

Modernist fiction appeared at the beginning of the 20th century and prevailed during the 20s 30s of the 20th century in English literature. It was a movement of experiments in new technique in writing characterized by the "stream of consciousness". The striking feature of these novels is their giving precedence to the depiction of the characters' mental and emotional reactions to external events, rather than the events themselves. In doing so, the novelists abandoned the conventional usages of realistic plot structure, characterization and description, and their works became successions of "fleeting images of the external world with thoughts and half-thoughts and shadows of thought attached to the immediate present or moving back and forth in memory" (LIU, 1993).

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Modern fiction has some striking features. First of all, its subject tends to be tragic or comic-tragic in essence which could be easily seen in James Joyce's short story *A Little Cloud*. Little Chandler's efforts of changing life reality ends in bitter resignation or fruitless discontent in the paralysed condition Dublin and his dream of getting away is destroyed.

Modernist fiction is also characterized by novelty in form and the method of "stream of consciousness" is considered the most conspicuous feature of modernist fiction. Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* is such a case in point. The masterpiece of modern fiction-- James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* has been called "a modern prose epic" (LIU, 1993) which tells of the wanderings of the hero Leopold Bloom during the 24 hours of a single day through recording the characters' mental activities by the use of the "stream of consciousness" method. And his great novel *Finnegans Wake* is difficult to comprehend and even unreadable for its unprecedented experiment in a new prose style and a new novel form.

Obscurity in language is another feature of modernist fiction, which seems unavoidable in the use of the stream of consciousness method whether in Joyce's *Ulysses* or in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The obscurity is partly due to the authors' love of word play which can sometimes very brilliant, but more often than not because the identities of the different minor characters generally have to be introduced gradually by their own words and deeds and not outright by the author (CHEN, 1999).

As far as the subject is concerned, modernist fiction's subject is tragic or comic tragic in essence and tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history (think of *Wasteland*, for instance, or Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), and presents that fragmentation as something tragic, something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Many modernist works try to uphold the idea that novels can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which has been lost in most of modern life' art will do what other institutions fail to do.

In English literature, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are the two best-known novelists of the "stream of consciousness" which originated in France but British writers developed it to a very high level of artistic perfection. Both of them have their unique writing style. Joyce is well known for his epiphany while Woolf for her moment of importance.

### 1.1 James Joyce's Epiphany

James Joyce's first important work *Dubliners*, a collection of 15 short stories, is all realistic and impressionistic studies of life, thoughts, dreams, aspirations and frustrations of diverse inhabitants in the Irish capital. These stories are written in accordance with Joyce's theory of "epiphanies", i.e. deep insights that might be gained through incidents and circumstances which seem outwardly significant. One of the short stories *A Little Cloud* is such a case in point. It tells Little Chandler's experience of going to meet his friend Gallaher and his mental activities with hope to change his life reality in Dublin only to find it uselessness in the end-his sudden realization of truth or epiphany.

### 1.2 Virginia Woolf's "Moment of Importance"

Virginia Woolf was among the most important modernist writers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century England. She was known in her time chiefly for the use of the "stream of consciousness" method in fiction. Virginia Woolf tried out her technical experiments with fiction and the extreme richness of the author's imagination may be seen in her works characterized by the "moment of importance". The writer fixes such a moment what Virginia Woolf calls "moment of importance", a quite new concept of time and consciousness adopted by modernists, and turns it into individual life. The "moment of importance", according to Woolf, "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on ordinary day. The mind receives myriad impressions-trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from an old: the moment of importance came not here but there; ..."She holds that the novelist's task is to "record the atoms as they fall" and to "convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit (CHEN, 1999).

Take her short story *The Mark on the Wall* as an example. The whole story probably lasts only half an hour or so starting with the narrator's sight of the mark on the wall and ending with her realization of the mark which turns out to be a snail, yet it reveals the complicated process of the character's thoughts, feelings, imaginations, memories and expectations of the narrator in its original shape without any artistic change.

Her short story *The Mark on the Wall* may be taken as an example of modernist concept of time and consciousness.

For instance, the story does not introduce time(when), space(where) and setting of the story at the beginning traditional fiction does but directly starts from the thoughts flow of the narrator's consciousness. "Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. ..."In this way, it reflects the genuine experience of the character's intricate work of mind. Also, the combined use of the present and past tense at the beginning of the story mirrors the reality of human mind to form a continuous flow of inner world.

And the last sentence in the beginning paragraph serves as the topic of the whole story. "The mark was a small round mark, Black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece."

Then the story proceeds with the narrator's flow of thoughts. "How ready our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it."

It can be found that the narrator's thinking is quite similar to the working of our mind- picking up one thing and drop it another moment. And the story goes on with the narrator's first assumption of the mark.

"If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature-the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations." However, the narrator negates her first assumption then. "But for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; it's too big, too round, for that, I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it; ..."

Then the narrator negates her new assumption. "And yet that mark on the wall is not a hole at all. It 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-...I must jump up and see for myself what that mark on the wall really is-a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood?"

Thus the story goes on with the narrator's new assumption and negation of the mark on the wall, meanwhile the mark on the wall changes and it's just like a glimpse of the world, but each glimpse is an incomplete' fragmentary and significant reflection of human thoughts. Actually the writer just uses these trivial objects to reveal the character's inner thoughts.

Eventually the story ends with someone's conversation with the narrator which interrupts the narrator's profound, philosophical thinking and pulls the narrator into reality.

Virginia Woolf tried out her technical experiments with fiction and the extreme richness of the author's imagination may be seen in her works. The writer fixes such a moment what Virginia Woolf calls "moment of importance", a quite new concept of time and consciousness adopted by modernists, and turns it into individual life. The whole story probably lasts only half an hour or so starting with the narrator's sight of the mark on the wall and ending with her realization of the mark which turns out to be a snail, yet it reveals the complicated process of the character's thoughts, feelings, imaginations, memories and expectations of the narrator in its original shape without any artistic change.

## **2. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EPIPHANY AND "MOMENT OF IMPORTANCE"**

Joyce's epiphany and Woolf's "moment of importance" are both characteristic writing techniques of stream of consciousness in modern fiction. There are some similarities between them. First of all, both are

artistically designed by their writers to represent the moment of mental experience. For instance, Little Chandler's epiphany in Joyce's short story *A Little Cloud* and the sight of the mark in Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* are deliberately arranged to reveal characters' complicated inner thoughts. In addition, both of them need the impact of the external world or stimulus on the human mind. In Joyce's *A Little Cloud*, Little Chandler realized suddenly his hopelessness of life in Dublin triggered by his so-called friend Gallaher's insult and his wife's teasing; and it is the snail in *The Mark on the Wall* that stimulates the intricate workings of the heroine's conscious and subconscious mind. Thirdly, both writing techniques intend to show rather than comment. The writers just present the characters' thoughts and emotional reactions but do not make comments on them, characters are introduced by their own thoughts, words and deeds but not outright by the authors, which leaves a large space for readers' imagination and thinking.

On the other hand, epiphany and "moment of importance" have some differences. Firstly, epiphany is closely related to the plot of the story, while "moment of importance" embodies the characteristics of promptness, randomness and fragmentation. For example, with the story progressing, Little Chandler in *A Little Cloud* realized suddenly in the end his inescapability of reality; in Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall*, the character's sight of the mark on the wall is assumed and negated again and again which seems rather prompt, random and fragment. Secondly, in sense of time, epiphany usually marks the abrupt, sudden climax of the story and when it occurred at the certain place and time, the story ends suddenly, while "moment of importance" often represents a lasting continuous flow of the character's inner world. More specifically, the short story *A Little Cloud* reaches its climax and ends when Little Chandler found the truth of his life reality; while the character's lasting thoughts centered upon life's profound, philosophical thinking triggered by the mark on the wall seem to be interrupted or frustrated in the end of the story by someone's conversation and the narrator's realization of the snail. Thirdly, epiphany has a wider social impact and more profound moral significance while "moment of importance" has a narrow and intimate focus on personal character. Little Chandler's epiphany reflects the paralysed condition of the city Dublin and the young may dream of escaping from the narrow confines, but since their dreams of getting away are shaped in the existing surroundings, their efforts often end in bitter resignation or fruitless discontent (from Liu Bingshan 1993). The general impression of the readers gets from the short story is the feeling of pervading gloom over all Dublin, which reflects the real social condition. "Moment of importance" in Woolf's short story helps to reveal the character's richness of imagination or mental reactions and reflects the significance of human thoughts which are visible the flickerings of that inner most flame that flashes its messages through the brain.

### 3. SUMMARY

Modernism is the mainstream of English and American literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and its experimental result surpasses any school before. To a large extent it modifies readers' aesthetic and world concept. Modernism is characterized by novelty in form which abandons traditional structure unity, time and logic continuity with an open ending or no ending, or the story ends where it begins. It advocates the unity of time, consciousness and techniques with quite a new concept of time and space. Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* is a case in point which starts with the mark on the wall and ends with the mark-the snail on the wall in less than an hour abundant with the narrator's flow of thinking. Moreover, it's obscure in language and its subject tends to be tragic or comic-tragic in essence which could be easily seen in James Joyce's short novel *A Little Cloud*. Little Chandler's efforts of changing life reality ends in bitter resignation or fruitless discontent in the paralysed condition Dublin and his dream of getting away is destroyed.

Another striking feature of modern fiction is their giving precedence to the depiction of the characters' mental and emotional reactions to external events, rather than the events themselves. In doing so, the novelists abandoned the conventional usages of realistic plot structure, characterization and description, and their works became successions of "fleeting images of the external world with thoughts and half-thoughts and shadows of thought attached to the immediate present or moving back and forth in memory" (CHEN, 1999). In other words, modern fiction focuses on characters' inner world rather than their

physical outlook as traditional fiction usually does. Thus modern fiction does not start with the introduction of the time of a story and records the life experience of characters but usually reveals the characters' thoughts in less than an hour or just two or three days.

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