The Mark on the Wall Short Guide

The Mark on the Wall by Virginia Woolf

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

In her efforts to find or create another narrative mode than the one which she felt exercised a tyranny of demands (e.g.

a plot) Woolf suggested that a writer might "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day." This approach was in direct contrast to the novel in which a protagonist (usually male) has a series of adventures and performs various heroic feats, and it follows Woolfs efforts to write a kind of composite alternative history in which the domestic, the private, and the feminine took precedence. The only character in "The Mark on the Wall" is a person engaged in an act of contemplation. As (presumably) she looks at the mark, the range of her mind expands outward from this initial observation, reaching back into the past when she first noticed it, and then in many directions as association leads to association, thought to further thought, and onward to reflection on these thoughts and on the process of thought itself. The flow of consciousness that Woolf writes to render the character (who is nameless and has no discernible physical features, a specific age, or any background detail) depends for its power to interest a reader on the brilliance of its intellectual deliberations, but since this is not just a philosophic disquisition, the personality of the character is equally important. Woolf subtly builds a recognizable human being by controlling mood and temperament through gradual revelations. The tentative "perhaps" at the start, the phrase "so now I think" and then "Yes, it must have been . . ." show the narrator making an effort to be accurate that induces sympathy as the reader recognizes her sincerity. The comment "I was smoking a cigarette . . ." places her among ordinary pursuits, and the expostulation "Rather to my relief. . ." creates an aura of uncertainty that balances the bold assertions that occur frequently.

Then, the lyric intensity of the descriptions is compelling, as when she catalogues some lost possessions: Then there were the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates, the Queen Anne coal-scuttle, the bagatelle board, the hand organ—all gone, and jewels too. Opals and emeralds lie about like roots of turnips.

Her energy and enthusiasm when she launches into an almost rapturous exploration of phenomena—"How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object"— tends to move what are sometimes self-enclosed mental gymnastics to a more universal plane. There is something endearing when she concedes, "I, not being a vigilant housekeeper—look at the dust on the mantlepiece . . . ," right after indicating the acuity of her inner vision with vivid lists. When she declares fervently, "I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted," the force of her desire for what seems like antisocial solitude is mitigated by the human foibles she has confessed to.

Since the "action" is almost entirely within her mind, though, it is the Mind that must hold the reader's interest, but Woolf realizes that everything has its limits. She uses suspense to a small degree when the narrator abruptly blurts out, "I must jump up and

see for myself what the mark on the wall really is ... ." This implies that the reader has been wondering as well, and that curiosity lurks behind another page or so of reflection and supposition. The conclusion of the story is a concession to the traditional impulse toward closure as the narrator seems to be on the verge of disappearing into a sort of mental vortex ("Where was I?

What has it all been about? . . . Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing . . . .") until another person interrupts with the most mundane of comments, "I'm going out to buy a newspaper." This snaps the narrator back into the ordinary world, and then in a nice twist, the other person, after cursing the war, asks innocendy, "I don't see why we should have a snail on the wall." This totally practical point casts the entire lofty philosophic excursion of the body of the story in another light, completing (to a degree) the portrait of the narrator as a slighdy bemused if very intellectually agile person, more than just a fascinating (and far from ordinary) mind in action.

Social Concerns

In her superb biography Virginia Woolf (1996), Hermione Lee summarized the Edwardian years by saying that they "polarised conservatives and dissenters."

The voices of the Establishment—that is, the people who had been ruling England for centuries—"spoke for Christianity, patriotism, the defence of the realm, and women in their place; against degeneracy, poisonous foreign influences, effeminacy, pacifism, cowardice, modernism and the weakening of the race." Woolf herself, although raised in an almost classically decorous, even fussy Victorian home, "was always explicitly on the radical, subversive and modern side of this cultural divide" in her writing, as Lee puts it, and her short story "The Mark on the Wall" was one of her first works to exhibit all of these attributes.

One of the most significant cultural events of the Edwardian era took place in 1910 when the Post-Impressionist Exhibition mounted by Roger Fry introduced the work of painters like Manet, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse to the English public. Woolf, in recalling the paintings in an homage to Fry in 1935, declared, "They are no longer silent, decorous, dull. They are things we live with, laugh at, discuss." The furor that the exhibition aroused paralleled the reactionary attack on the woman's suffrage movement, and Woolf not only felt a kinship with the painters who were finding new ways to look at the world but also felt a strong sense of identification with artists whose work was condemned for its unsettling effect on Edwardian materialism. In addition, the medical profession in England had labeled the suffrage movement an example of "militant hysteria," while the paintings in the show were called "the work of madmen" and of interest only to "students of pathology and the specialist in abnormality." Woolf had already experienced some of the periods of mental turmoil which were to recur throughout her life and was understandably sensitive to the dismissive comments of ignorant officials whose narrow view of the normal excluded almost anything new or different.

Consequently, Woolf was encouraged, if not inspired, by the modernist painters to try new forms in her own work. Their alterations of time and space suggested that in writing as well, the traditional methods of narrative organization were not fixed and immutable, and that such permanent concepts as Truth and Reality might be subject to the particular perspective of the artist. At the time when Woolf was writing "The Mark on the Wall," this kind of thinking represented the cutting edge of the avant-garde, a radical challenge to accepted precepts of literary composition and a clear subversion of an Empire that depended on a kind of standard literary performance (for instance, Arnold Bennett, Rudyard Kipling, and Alfred Tennyson) to solidify various social assumptions. "The Mark on the Wall" was directed towards the largest social concerns of an era, probing the fundamental framework of a society by posing questions about how one sees the world; how one evaluates the data that is gathered moment by moment into the flow of a person's consciousness, and how human beings can understand and live with each other when the common assumptions of a nation are subject to radical change. In order to explore these issues, Woolf fashioned an unconventional "story"

where nothing happened other than the play of the mind of the single character over a vast field of phenomena. The Mind itself might then be considered the "character" whose story is occurring.

Techniques

At the time she wrote "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf was quite enthusiastic about the work of James Joyce (if somewhat uncertain about the early chapters she saw of Ulysses), praising him for his ability "to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain." In summarizing her own technique in "The Mark on the Wall," she described those messages as "myriad impressions" which she listed as "trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel." Her efforts to record the flow or stream of consciousness paralleling what Joyce was doing drew on two crucial, revolutionary components of Modernism. One was the work of the Post-Impressionist painters.

The other, which she was much less directly familiar with, was the theoretical work being done in particle physics and quantum mechanics, an aspect of the Zeitgeist that Woolf was aware of.

Roger Fry immediately recognized her inspiration in the work of the artists who were featured in his famous exhibition, complimenting Woolf on the "plasticity" of "The Mark on the Wall," and Woolf responded by saying "I'm not sure that a perverted plastic sense doesn't somehow work itself out in words for me." The concept of plasticity is somewhat vague, but in "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf muses over the mutability of boundaries between species or categories: As for saying which are trees, and which are men and women, or whether there are such things, that one won't be in a condition to do for fifty years or so.

As in a Post-Impressionist painting, "There will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct color." The sense of abstraction, of shifting shapes and variable hues and tones undermining the absolutes of Edwardian culture, runs throughout the story.

In the middle of "The Mark on the Wall" Woolf indicates an awareness of the mind's operation as it occurs—"I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts. To steady myself, let me catch hold of the first idea that passes." Here, in an anticipation of postmodernist narrative self-reflection, Woolf is illustrating the manner in which the awareness of process affects the process itself. This is a concept roughly similar to Werner Heisenberg's revolutionary Uncertainty Principle, which holds that nothing can be precisely observed since the process of observation alters the original position or shape of the object.

Woolf is interested in the same philosophical ramifications which made Heisenberg's assertion so provocative, that observation colors and even distorts conclusion. Throughout the story, she follows the principle which she explains as "All the time I'm dressing up the figure of myself in my own mind, lovingly."

What she actually sees is much less important than the way she sees it. The actual "mark" becomes a point of departure, not the answer to her questions.

This is in accordance with the cosmological view that gradually emerges through the story, a position that parallels the theoretical tack taken by astrophysicists who were working with the radically transformative Einsteinian view of the universe. In total contrast with the fixed universe of Newtonian physics which was one of the defining precepts of the Victorian world picture, Woolf asserts, "nothing is proved, nothing is known"; comments "what an accidental affair this living is"; recognizes a world where "all is casual, all so haphazard." Instead of a cause for concern, however, this is the key to her entire vision of what she has called "life or spirit, truth or reality . . .

the essential thing" in "Modern Fiction."

In "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf's technique for conveying or expressing reality has become an important, even defining component of reality itself. As much as anything else, it is the "essential thing."

Themes

Just as the artists whose work was shown in the Post-Impressionist Exhibition were interested in seeing the world in new ways, Woolf at least since that show in 1910 was thinking about the limits and restrictions of familiar forms of literary expression. At the time that she was writing the short pieces that appeared in Monday or Tuesday (1921), she was also writing and continually revising her ideas about "Modern Fiction" in the essay of that name that eventually was published in 1925 in The Common Reader. A theme that runs through that work, restated on several occasions, is that: The writer seems constrained not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love, interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole . . .

Woolf felt it was essential to escape from this confinement. Her goal—"to come closer to life"—was to discard the elements (plot, probability, etc.,) she mentioned and to examine instead how "the mind receives a myriad of impressions" on what she called "an ordinary day."

Since she was not writing a conventional story, she did not feel the need to follow or develop a theme in the commonly accepted sense. Instead, the theme of "The Mark on the Wall" is the manner in which the mind constructs or shapes "reality" in terms of its assimilation and assessment of a collage of sensory data.

One of Woolfs essential assumptions is that there is no one version of "reality" common to everyone's experience, a direct challenge to the standard Victorian view that there were certain truths available to all educated people. Woolf begins "The Mark on the Wall" in an ambiguous mood of reflection—"Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year"— and proceeded to record the thoughts of the narrator as she (although no gender is specified) fixes her attention on the spot or mark. Her flow of consciousness moves between literal detail and the patterns of association it triggers, her mind questioning and probing as the process continues. The essential pattern she follows is to dissolve some of the linkages that form literary reality, leaving the data but scrambling the connections. By removing paths (or ruts) that have directed responses to situations, Woolf is attempting to compel the reader to create a new matrix of meaning. Initially, the narrator's observations are focused on forces that resist attempts to organize information into definable contexts. The vague, lingering presence of others who previously lived in the house suggests that people are often separated ("torn asunder") before they can establish a shared frame of reference. Thinking about possessions lost or destroyed in the course of moving leads to a realization about the "accidental" nature of life, "how very little control" people have. Her reflections on the supposed permanence of the Victorian world (which for Woolf was constantly being unsettled by the death of people close to her) recall a time when "there was a rule for everything." Now, she sees "the masculine point of view" as "half a phantom" which she hopes will soon be "laughed into the dustbin."

The resulting prospect of "an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom" is presented as both liberating and disturbing.

The uncertainty that follows the removal of figures of authority of the Victorian era (epitomized here by a befuddled "Retired Colonel") leads toward a statement of the overarching theme of the story, "And what is knowledge?"—a query with no conclusive answer but one that Woolf felt had to be a constant factor in her work and ultimately in her way of approaching the world. The confusion that follows is exhilarating but at the time she was writing "The Mark on the Wall," it could not be resolved, so the theme (how the mind shapes a version of "reality") is presented as a kind of quest with no conclusion. As she says in the last part of the story, "Where was I?

What has it all been about. . . There is a vast upheaval of matter." Although Woolf does conclude the story with a comforting return to a familiar version of reality (the mark turns out to be a snail), this concession to convention is undercut by the wild flux of thoughts in "vast upheaval" that is the story's real conclusion.

The condition of uncertainty that is the story's essence becomes the ultimate "reality" of the world seen in "The Mark on the Wall" and the inquisitive intelligence that drives the narrative its most characteristic feature.

Key Questions

Even -with the passage of time and all of the imaginative experiments in form, style, language, and subject that have occurred through the twentieth century, "The Mark on the Wall" still feels fresh and vibrant, supporting Woolf's exuberant recollection "I shall never forget the day I wrote The Mark on the Wall—all in a flash, as if flying, after being kept stone breaking for months." To Roger Fry, who admired its utilization of post-impressionist techniques, it displayed "The power of artistic detachment from life."

One might argue, however, that it shows a different kind of artist involvement with life. One of Woolf's better biographers, Panthea Reid, suggested that the story "contrasts holistic meditation with purposeful activity," but that too could be challenged. Perhaps the meditative qualities are a demonstration of a different kind of purposeful activity. In her excellent biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee describes the story as "quizzical, domestic, conversational." A fruitful discussion might focus on what each of these terms means and how they reflect the author's intentions.

1. Would it be possible to describe the narrative voice in terms of the attributes that Woolf leaves out? Physical dimensions, age, and background?

2. Since Woolf's background is familiar, is it reasonable to assume that the narrative consciousness is female? Can a case be made for a male narrator?

3. Examine in detail specific passages in terms of Woolf's utilization of the stream-of-conscious narration.

4. Some of Woolf's most powerful writing is similar to lyric poetry. Choose a particular passage and consider its poetic aspects.

5. Are there any comic elements in the story?

6. What kind of a picture of British society emerges from the story?

7. What measure of time might be used to describe the length or duration of the story? That is, how much time has elapsed from the start to the conclusion?

Literary Precedents

Woolf was not entirely sure about James Joyce's goals as a writer, but she was convinced that his approach to his craft was worth studying. "Whatever the intention of the whole there can be no question but that it is of the utmost sincerity, and that the result difficult or unpleasant as we may judge it, is undeniably important." What especially appealed to her was his willingness to move beyond narrow definitions of literary possibility. "He disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious," she wrote in "Modern Fiction," endorsing a point of view strikingly similar to her own credo. Aside from Joyce's own work, there were no clear precedents in literature for "The Mark on the Wall."

Woolf was as much a modernist innovator as the great figures of that movement working in other areas—Picasso, Stravinsky, Pound, or Eliot.

Related Titles

"I don't like writing for my half-brother George," Virginia Woolf wrote to her friend Bunny Garnett in July, 1917. It was actually her half-brother Gerald Duckworth who ran the firm but Woolf's point was that she did not want to be controlled or censored by anyone. Her first novel The Voyage Out (1915) was considered promising and original but while she was working on her second one, Night and Day (1919), she had already begun to feel constrained by the traditional forms of the novel and told Vanessa Stephen Bell, Woolf's sister who married Clive Bell in 1907, that "I should have liked to try the other way," hoping that Duckworth would not accept it for his list. As she noted in her diary, "the other way" would have made her "the only woman in England free to write what I like." Bell's suggestion "Why don't you write more short things?" touched a responsive chord but Woolf had been severely shaken by the mental breakdown she suffered in 1916, and had kept Night and Day in a conventional form "to prove to my own satisfaction that I could keep entirely off that dangerous ground." By "dangerous ground," she meant the "poems, stories, profound and inspired phrases" that she made up while bedridden. Her first short story, "The Mark on the Wall," she described as being written "all in a flash, as if flying," in contrast to the work on the novel which she called "stone breaking."

One of the reasons she felt that it was necessary to write shorter pieces was the establishment of the Hogarth Press in partnership with her husband Leonard.

Their first publication in 1917 was Two Stories which contained Leonard's "Three Jews" and "The Mark on the Wall." It was a modest success, earning a profit of seven pounds on 134 copies, but this was sufficient to encourage Woolf to continue to work on short fiction, and the next publication of the Hogarth Press was the story "Kew Gardens," which included four woodcuts created by her sister Vanessa as illustrations.

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