

A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE
IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S TO THE LIGHTHOUSE
AND WILLIAM FAULKNER'S AS I LAY DYING

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to compare Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, as well as two of their novels, To the Lighthouse and As I Lay Dying, and their employment of stream of consciousness as subject matter and technique in these two novels. This comparative study does not intend to show the influence exercised by one of them on the other, but rather the main points of similarity and difference between them.

This study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter deals with the two novelists in general. Such a comparison may seem at first place strange, for the two novelists have apparently nothing in common except their being two of the well known novelists of the twentieth century and part of the great movement of modern fiction. Moreover, there is no evidence to prove that either one of them met the other or even read his or her works, despite the fact that Faulkner went to England in 1925.

However, this is an attempt at a comparison that depends mainly on the diaries (in the case of Woolf), the letters, the critical essays (especially in the case of Woolf who, unlike Faulkner, left a countless number of essays), and the biographies (mainly on Faulkner)- in short, whatever was said or written by any of the two novelists that sheds light on their concepts of writing, and the autobiographical elements that might have helped them as novelists.

The comparison made in the first chapter will stress certain points in particular: their attitude towards inner reality, their admiration for James Joyce, their tendency to experiment, their employment of certain autobiographical elements in their fiction, and finally their readings and how these affected them as writers.

As for the second chapter, it moves from the two writers to their two novels, To the Lighthouse and As I Lay Dying. The same thing will be attempted as in the first chapter, that is, emphasizing the main points of similarity between the two novels depending mainly on the texts and on the words said or written by Woolf and Faulkner on these two novels in particular.

Unfortunately, it will be almost impossible to achieve a sort of equilibrium when writing about the two writers and their novels, as the number of quotations and paragraphs speaking, for instance, about Woolf's tendency for experimentation will exceed those of Faulkner. This is mainly due to the fact that Woolf left an immense heritage of autobiographical writings, five volumes of diaries together with A Writer's Diary, six volumes of letters, and as mentioned before, hundreds of critical essays.

Faulkner's heritage is very poor in comparison, consisting of two books containing his letters, Selected Letters of Faulkner edited by Joseph Blotner, and The Faulkner-Cowley File edited by Malcolm Cowley, a few interviews: (the one with Jean Stein, the one at West Point, and the long and very illuminating sessions with the students of the University of Virginia). In fact, there is a book that contains all his interviews, Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962, but unfortunately, it is not available. Moreover, a few of his critical essays are published in William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches and Public Letters edited by James Meriwether.

The third chapter acts as a transitory one as it moves from the general comparison made between the two writers and their novels to a more specific one- that is their employment of stream of consciousness as subject matter and technique in

the two novels mentioned. But before dealing with this subject, it will be necessary to discuss some of the concepts of two thinkers who enriched stream-of-consciousness fiction, those of William James and Henri Bergson, and to assess their contribution to this fiction.

These two, in particular, were chosen because James was the one who first used the term "stream of consciousness", while Bergson enriched and added to it through his concepts of flux and time, thus both in a way completing each other. This will be the subject of the third chapter which will also discuss the influence of these two thinkers on Woolf and Faulkner by analyzing their ideas and quotations and comparing them with Bergson's in particular.

The main references are The Principles of Psychology vol.I, The Varieties of Religious Experience, and Talks to Teachers on Psychology by William James, and Time and Free Will, The Creative Evolution, The Creative Mind, Laughter, and The Two Sources of Morality and Religion by Bergson. The number of Bergson's books exceeds those of William James because his concepts are scattered throughout his works, whereas those of James are in a way limited to a certain number of books. Moreover, Bergson, unlike James, had a great interest in literature and in the role of the writer.

The rest of this chapter will present a quick survey of the definitions and objectives of stream-of-consciousness fiction as discussed by three critics in particular: Robert Humphrey, whose Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel is a classical reference to whomever is interested in this kind of fiction, Leon Edel, and Lawrence E. Bowling. Then, there will be an attempt to trace the stream of consciousness technique in early English novels starting from Samuel Richardson's Pamela

to Jane Austen's Emma, George Eliot's Adam Bede, and finally Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady.

The next two chapters will begin with the main characteristics of stream of consciousness fiction as defined by Robert Humphrey. The rest of these two chapters will try to show how To the Lighthouse and As I Lay Dying are stream-of-consciousness novels by quoting one passage from each novel, and tracing these characteristics (as defined by Humphrey) in that passage and elsewhere in the novels.

It is noteworthy that To the Lighthouse and As I Lay Dying have been discussed by a great number of critics. But most of these critics have examined the two novels separately, and with special stress on certain elements as imagery and symbols, or language in general, or the element of time and place, or characters. Hence, the main concern of the fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis is to study these two novels in comparison and to examine all the previously mentioned elements only as part of the two writers' employment of stream of consciousness. So, for example, imagery and symbols or language in general will not be discussed for their own sake, but mainly as elements that help the writer reveal the stream of consciousness in the portrayal of a certain character.

The last chapter is an attempt to show how Woolf and Faulkner managed to impose form and order on their novels despite their employment of a technique which mainly suggests disorder. This was mainly achieved through some of the patterns which, according to Robert Humphrey, are employed by the majority of stream-of-consciousness writers to avoid chaos.

Finally, after going through these two novelists' biographical and autobiographical writings, and analyzing their two novels, it will be possible to assess their success or failure in practising what they preached. It will also be possible to define the points of similarity and difference in their two novels and in their employment of stream of consciousness. The conclusion will also attempt an evaluation of their influence on modern fiction in general and especially on the modern French writers, and what is known as the "Nouveau Roman".

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER ONE

When speaking of modern fiction, two well known names impose themselves upon us: Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. Though they lived in two different continents, they both belonged to a period of instability and revolutionary change in various aspects of life.

The 1920's, the decade in which To the Lighthouse and As I Lay Dying were written, was a time of disillusionment for both Europe and America. This was mainly due to the First World War. Marcus Cunliffe in The Literature of the United States says that the Americans felt that this " was not ... their war " and adds that " Many Europeans experienced, and wrote of, a similar disillusionment."¹ In fact, this war left its effect on the economic side of life especially in Europe.

At the same time and according to R. L. Chambers " a dissolution of standards - social, ethical, philosophical, aesthetic, religious - ... and a vast and a confused re-issue and re-valuation " (sic) took place, thus the " Twenties can be called the age of irresponsibility,- they have been called the Careless Twenties...." ²

The response of both Woolf and Faulkner to the World War can be seen through that of their literary groups: Bloomsbury, and The Lost Generation. The former was mainly a circle of close

¹ Marcus Cunliffe, The Literature of the United States (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970) p.276

² R.L. Chambers, The Novels of Virginia Woolf (New York: Russell and Russell, 1971) pp. 61, 64

friends who lived in and around a place called Bloomsbury, near The British Museum in London. The group started with regular Thursday visits paid by some Cambridge graduates to their friend Thoby Stephen. It included the Stephens: Thoby, Adrian, Virginia, and Vanessa, in addition to Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, Desmond and Molly MacCarthy, Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, and three lesser known men: Saxon Sydney Turner, Gerald Shrove, and H. T. J. Norton.³

Michael Rosenthal describes them as " a group of highly sophisticated, cerebral people who frequently met to do one of the things, at least, they liked best: talk ", and their "credo" was " Moore in his Principia Ethica [where he] asserted that the most valuable things a human being can experience are the pleasures of human friendship and the enjoyment of beautiful objects." ⁴ The Bloomsburies " strongly opposed war seeing it as a monstrous blunder threatening to destroy a European civilization which was far more important than the petty claims of any single country."⁵

As for The Lost Generation, they did not form a group in the true sense of the word since they did not meet regularly or exchange talk or letters; however they represented a new literary movement in the history of American literature. With them "Everything in American literature seemed to be starting afresh. Every possibility seemed to be opening for the first time ... and

³ Michael Rosenthal,

Virginia Woolf (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) p.21

⁴ Ibid, p.22

⁵ Ibid, p.25

almost any achievement seemed feasible." ⁶ The group included Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Thornton Wilder, e.e.cummings, and Kenneth Burke.

" They all had a sense of being measured against the European past- against the future too - and of being called upon to do not only their best but something mysteriously better....".⁷ The Lost Generation refused the war though some of the members participated in it. Beach says: "I think we may say that all of them have viewed the First World War with the same horror and dismay; that they all have shared the same doubts as to the ideology that inspired it and led to our participation in it....".⁸

Although Woolf and Faulkner did not pay great attention to the war's political or economic results, they were mainly concerned with the way in which it affected man. This is clearly portrayed by Woolf in Mrs. Dalloway and by Faulkner in Soldiers' Pay, both being condemnations of the war and social satires. Speaking about " this book " in her diary, Woolf wrote: " I want to criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense."⁹

⁶ Malcolm Cowley ed. The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters & Memories, 1944-1962 (New York: Viking Press, 1968) p.173

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction, 1920-1940 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960) p.11

⁹ Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Diary ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975) p.57

Mrs. Dalloway reveals how the war destroyed Septimus Warren Smith's psyche causing his " complete physical and nervous breakdown ".¹⁰ One of the reasons that deeply affected him was the death of his close friend, officer Evans, in the war. At first, Septimus tried to remain strong, but finally his strength failed him and " he gave in ".¹¹

Consequently, he always appeared " out of sorts ".¹² To his wife he " wasn't Septimus any longer " and " had grown stranger and stranger "¹³: he talked to himself and seemed unaware of what was going on around him. Moreover, he imagined hearing and seeing unbelievable things as, for instance, when once in Regent's Park, he heard the birds singing in Greek and saw Evans coming from behind the bushes singing. On another occasion " He had seen an old woman 's head in the middle of a fern."¹⁴

In addition to this queer imagination, Septimus started to believe: " it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning "; he also lost sensation: " he could not taste, he could not feel "¹⁵ even when his wife sobbed in tears. Still he had one feeling, that of guilt; so during his visit to Sir William Bradshaw, a psychiatrist, he felt as if he were on trial and admitted: "I have- I have- committed a crime--".¹⁶

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942) p.122

¹¹ Ibid, p.115

¹² Ibid, p.28

¹³ Ibid, pp.83, 84

¹⁴ Ibid, p.84

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 112

¹⁶ Ibid, p.123

Septimus had also his own fears and nightmares; so at home "he lay on the sofa and made ... [his wife] hold his hand to prevent him from falling down, down, he cried, into the flames! and saw faces laughing at him, calling him horrible disgusting names...."¹⁷ All these things made his life and his chance to fit into society again almost impossible. Finally, he committed suicide by throwing himself out of the window.

Similarly in Soldiers' Pay Faulkner condemns war through the figure of Donald Mahon who returns with a disfigured face: "[a] tortured brow, and [a] dreadful scar that makes one sick ", in addition to " his right hand [which is]... drawn and withered".¹⁸ At first it was thought that he was killed in action, but when he appeared to be alive, he was in no better state than dead. Like Septimus, he seemed as if he were living in a state of dreaminess: unable to recognize his father, his girl friend, or even his fiancée. Mahon's physical state deteriorates till he finally dies.

In addition to Mahon's suffering and death, it is clear from the beginning of the novel how the soldiers hate war. On the train taking them home one of them sat on the ground weeping, whereas another soldier said: " ain't war hell? "¹⁹ a fact made clear when a third one spoke about ten or fifteen men who were killed in the battle of Coonyak.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.65

¹⁸ William Faulkner, Soldiers' Pay (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965) pp.20,21

¹⁹ Ibid, p.3