

Time and the Sacred in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche famously declares in *The Gay Science* that “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” (120). Roughly demarcating the initial boundary of the modernist period, Nietzsche’s pronouncement alludes to the scepticism about organized religion and religious values that characterizes the literature of the time. Much modernist literature charts writers’ various attempts to express and explore religious impulses – senses of the sacred – outside of the framework of traditional Christianity and its corresponding rites and ceremonies of worship. Virginia Woolf, for example, proposes alternative avenues through which to commune with the sacred in the middle section of her novel *To the Lighthouse*, entitled “Time Passes.” Specifically, in this section of the text, Woolf enlists an innovative conception of time to create windows of opportunity for profound spiritual meditation. In doing so she opens the possibility of feeling the sacred in everyday events and experiences, and in turn the possibility of connecting more intensely with existence.

“Time Passes” is the shortest of the three sections that make up *To the Lighthouse*, and yet it covers the longest period of time: approximately ten years. This paradox in itself contributes to critics’ common argument that in this section, Woolf transcends or collapses ordinary temporality. In his book *History, Politics and the Novel*, Dominick LaCapra points out that the argument that Woolf collapses linear time creates a dichotomy between time and the intemporal; in other words, it sets linear time in opposition to a state of collapsed temporality. He proposes an alternative and more complex theory about how Woolf constructs time in “Time Passes”, which allows for an interplay between linear time and the intemporal, instead of a dichotomy. LaCapra theorizes time as having a two-dimensional structure, made up of a horizontal plane and a vertical plane. The horizontal plane represents diachronic time, which is concerned with events as they develop through time on a linear trajectory. The diachronic dimension of time comprises everyday commonplace events, as well as what LaCapra describes as “epochmaking events, like war in collective life or marriage in personal life” (138). The vertical plane represents synchronic time, which is concerned with an event, or part of an event, as it exists at one exact point in time. The synchronic dimension of time comprises one moment that is fixed or lengthened in defiance of ordinary linear time. In these synchronic moments, Woolf delves into a deep and detailed analysis of the experience of that moment. In LaCapra’s words, this “aesthetic immobilization and perception in depth of the random event or moment *seems* to provide a fleeting passage outside time” (138). Woolf’s use of the synchronic dimension of time is what leads to the common conclusion that she transcends linear time. In effect, however, it is not simply a matter of Woolf transcending or collapsing linear time in this section of her text; instead, time is made up of the complex interplay between the diachronic and synchronic dimensions.

One of the most interesting aspects of “Time Passes” is the emphasis that Woolf places on the synchronic dimension of time, or, in other words, the emphasis she puts on the moments in time that seem to be slowed down and perceived in depth.

Traditionally, the substance of a narrative is composed of the “epochmaking events” that occur on the diachronic plane of linear time. LaCapra points out that Woolf inverts this traditional narrative structure; the major historical events in this section, like Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Prue’s marriage and her death during childbirth, and Andrew’s death during the war, are parenthetical details in the most literal sense, as they are set apart from the body of the text in parentheses. Throughout most of this section, Woolf focuses instead on what might otherwise be seen as insignificant moments. It is these moments, and the subsequent meditations that seem to extend or prolong them, that actually form the body of the text.

Woolf focuses on the synchronic moments of time, and as a result she frees herself from the limitations of ordinary linear time. If Woolf simply rendered discrete events occurring on the diachronic plane, she would not have the same opportunity to engage with and examine the sacred nature of everyday life. The synchronic dimension of the temporal structure is what allows Woolf seemingly to immobilize an event or an experience, to meditate on it in depth, and to convey more effectively the numinous or sacred nature of that event or experience. The following passage exemplifies Woolf’s use of synchronic moments to engage with the sacred:

Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase. Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing room questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste-paper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which were now open to them and asking, Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure?

So some random light directing them with its pale footfall upon stair and mat, from some uncovered star, or wandering ship, or the Lighthouse even, the little airs mounted the staircase and nosed round bedroom doors. But here, surely, they must cease. Whatever else may perish and disappear, what lies here is steadfast. Here one might say to those sliding lights, those fumbling airs that breathe and bend over the bed itself, here you can neither touch or destroy (108).

Woolf gives the illusion of slowing regular time through her depiction of the “certain airs” moving through the house; she characterizes this movement with the verbs ‘creeping’, ‘fumbling’, and ‘nosing’, which renders an image of these airs winding their way through the house in slow-motion. She also states that time is at their disposal, which subverts the traditional understanding of time as a driving and governing force that does not slow down for anything or anybody. In this case, time is not a driving force, but is actually at the mercy of the slow-moving, creeping, fumbling airs.

This framework of decelerated time provides a unique locus for Woolf to meditate on issues pertaining to the sacred. Most obviously, the passage is imbued with uncertainty,

and a pressing anxiety about the ultimate effects of time, namely degeneration and mortality. The wandering airs “musingly” meditate over whether the house and everything within it will ultimately be subject to the decaying effects of time. The searching, inquiring tone of the passage reflects the human impulse to question one’s existence in time and to wonder about death. It mirrors the problem common to all humans of having to come to terms with one’s mortality, which is unforeseeable and yet imminent.

The end of the passage marks a shift in the narrative tone from uncertainty and anxiety to certainty; suddenly, the narrative voice denies time’s power to erode and destroy, and confidently proposes that everything within the house will surely remain untouched by time. This shift reflects a fascination with the possibility of immortality that is commonly associated with the sacred. The ideas of mortality and immortality are generally seen as relevant only to humans, but in this case Woolf applies these larger life questions to commonplace items like wall-paper, flowers, books and letters. In doing so, she shows that ideas commonly associated with the infinite and the sacred can permeate even the most ordinary things. Even the everyday can be numinous.

The end of this passage is demarcated by a parenthetical sentence: “[Here, Mr. Carmichael, who was reading Virgil, blew out his candle. It was midnight]” (108). This parenthetical detail about Mr. Carmichael pulls the reader out of the synchronic dimension of slowed time and back onto the diachronic dimension of linear time. The harsh typographical appearance of the parenthetical marks themselves contribute to the abruptness of the narrator’s shift back to relating a discrete event within linear time. The simple syntax and lack of detail in the sentence point at the limitations of relating an event in linear time, because the event is over almost as soon as it begins, and there is no room for meditation on the possible sacred implications of the event. The nature of the parenthetical sentence sets the synchronic dimension in relief as an ideal space for meditating on the numinosity of everyday things.

The following passage is another illuminating example of Woolf’ use of synchronic time to explore religious impulse and senses of the sacred:

As summer neared, as the evenings lengthened, there came to the wakeful, the hopeful, walking the beach, stirring the pool, imaginations of the strangest kind – of flesh turned to atoms, which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within. In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules; or to resist the extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure (112).

This passage is a poetic meditation on the experience of religious impulse; it conveys an extraordinary feeling of ardency, of wonder, and even of desire, all of which are feelings commonly linked with people's experience of the sacred. As in the first passage, Woolf's imagery helps her to enter the synchronic dimension of time, or in other words, to give the illusion that time is slowed down or immobilized. Her meditation on religious impulse takes the form of "strange imaginations in the minds of men", "in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form" and "dreams persist". First, the image of clouds *for ever* turning and *for ever* forming in the minds of men links the locus for meditation with the timeless realm of eternity. Also, the concept of the dream is significant. In reality a dream lasts for a few minutes, while in the mind of the sleeper it often seems to last for hours. This phenomenon mirrors Woolf's attempt to take time and extend or immobilize it. These images of eternity and of dreams help Woolf to make the minds of men into an intemporal space to meditate on the feelings that characterize religious impulse.

The motif that governs the passage is one that recurs through this section, namely the image of people who find themselves drawn by an "extraordinary stimulus" to walk the beach. The beach is a liminal space between the ocean and the land, and is therefore the ultimate place to intensify one's sense of connection with what Freud describes as "a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, 'oceanic'" (1). Woolf uses a number of beautiful images to characterize this oceanic feeling of religious impulse. First, the image of "stars flashing in their hearts" appeals to people's inclination to believe in some kind of divine or immortal force within themselves which transcends the corporeal. Also, this image of flashing stars conveys a sense of the ardency of people's experience of the sacred. Second, the image of "cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within" also describes people's sense of the sacred. It appeals to the wonder that people feel in seeing the sacred or transcendent force that they feel within themselves reflected in the sublimity of nature. This image echoes another beautiful metaphor Woolf uses in this section of "the world reflecting the compass of the soul" (128).

The end of the passage describes the quest that is motivated by the oceanic feeling; it is a quest for "some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure." Religious impulse incites in people an ardent desire to find something concrete and tangible, and yet other-worldly and distinct from the everyday, which will offer some kind of protection. This desire is a parallel to the appeals for divine protection that punctuate other modernist texts, namely T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

The synchronic dimension of time allows Woolf to escape the limiting shackles of linear time, and thus it facilitates her exploration of the sacred and religious impulse. Synchronic time opens up windows for her to meditate extensively on the numinosity of an event, a thing, or an experience. This section is almost pure poetry, as poetic language is the medium through which Woolf conveys these extended meditations on the sacred. In this sense, Woolf achieves Lily Briscoe's goal of transmuting the experience of the sacred into art. Woolf's innovative use of temporal structure to open up the sacred can be interpreted as guide to how to exist in time in the modern era; her

solution is to reframe how we view time and how we allow it to govern our lives, so that we are more open to connecting with the sacred. Embracing the synchronic dimension of time opens the possibility of feeling the sacred in everyday events and experiences, and in turn the possibility of connecting more intensely with existence.

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