

# ***Analysing Virginia Woolf's the Mark on the Wall from an Existentialist Perspective***

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**Abstract:** During the world wars, people experienced harsh realities and had no recourse. Traditional values were no longer suitable for the post-war world, but they could not find a new standard of living and suffered a crisis of identity. Given this background, both the existentialist thought of the philosophical world and the literary realm coincidentally turned to exploring the survival state of humankind. As a pioneering writer, Virginia Woolf had a meticulous portrayal and profound thinking about the spiritual state of human beings in the post-war period. The academic research on Woolf's works has mostly explored from the perspectives of feminism, epiphanic moments and narrative style of stream of consciousness, but less from the existentialist viewpoint. However, many of Woolf's works have different methods, leading to the same result with Existentialism. Therefore, this paper tries to analyse the existentialist tendency in Woolf's first stream-of-consciousness short story, *The Mark on the Wall*, with the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, the representative figures of Existentialism. The work shows the absurdity of the world and people's despair. The stream-of-consciousness narrative mingles the past, present and future, breaking the linear concept of time. It elaborates that people are free to exist but always face the constraints of established rules and conflicts with others, which coincides with Existentialism. In addition, Heidegger's view of the initiative of things is also reflected in the narrative way of constructing the protagonist's identity by depicting a series of objects in the piece.

**Keywords:** *The Mark on the Wall*, Virginia Woolf, existentialism

## **1. Introduction**

Adeline Virginia Woolf was an English woman writer, literary critic and literary theorist, a representative of stream-of-consciousness literature, and is regarded as a pioneer of twentieth-century modernism and feminism. During the two world wars, Woolf was a central figure in the London literary scene and a member of the Bloomsbury Group, whose best-known novels include *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. *The Mark on the Wall*, published in 1917, was the first stream-of-consciousness short story written by Woolf. Written as an internal monologue, the novel's heroine sparked free-associative thoughts from a spot on the wall that was jumbled together and actually had no connection to the mark, as the mark turned out to be a snail [1].

During the peak of Woolf's creativity, Existentialism prevailed in Europe. After the World War, Western people were facing a crisis of identity. Influenced by the similar social background, both of them were committed to exploring the concern for human existence and life itself, and many of

Woolf's works have a variety of similarities with Existentialism. Woolf's Existentialist thoughts are also implied in *The Mark on the Wall*.

The absurdity and disorder emphasised by Existentialism is evidenced in the background of the war. Woolf's portrayal of the post-war mental condition of the people in *The Mark on the Wall* also shows such an absurd and disordered state. Sartre's thesis on existence and essence, and the idea that "hell is other people", can also be found in *The Mark on the Wall*. After Heidegger, there was a shift in the concept of "thing". *The Mark on the Wall* adopts a stream-of-consciousness narrative, constructing a series of imagery, a series of things. The arrangement of these things seems to be chaotic, but in fact, they all serve the central purpose. These things are the main body of the work. Understanding people from the objects and feeling the role of the things in constructing the protagonist's identity is a more appropriate modern interpretation of the work. Therefore, this paper will analyse the manifestation of existentialist ideas in Woolf's work *The Mark on the Wall* from three aspects - the absurdity of the world and the view of time that breaks the concept of linearity; the freedom of people's existence and the loneliness that comes with that freedom; and the effect of things on the main character's construction of her identity.

## 2. Literature Review

There are three main areas of academic research on *The Mark on the Wall*: stream-of-consciousness narrative style, feminism and epiphanic moments. Virginia Woolf masterfully used major stream-of-consciousness writing techniques such as internal monologue, time montage and perspective shifting in the short story *The Mark on the Wall*. While showing her dedication to revolutionising the way she writes, the novel also reveals the unique spiritual pursuit of this woman writer [2]. Woolf believed that modernism was defined by glorifying "strange, disjointed fragments of thoughts", an imagined existence that was more real than external reality, that is, psychological realism. The traditional "tools of the Edwardian period" served the needs of men, and women had to use the language of "unity of the genders" and engage in a battle of ideologies to shatter tradition [3]. The work discusses how Woolf explored the psychological changes of the characters in the ordinary moments of their lives in terms of the techniques of expression and used them to reflect the essence of life and to reveal the eternal truths [4].

There are very few works analysing *The Mark on the Wall* from the perspective of Existentialism, and they are mainly explored from the angle of the link between the stream-of-consciousness narrative mode and the freedom of existence. Such a research focus does not depart from the general direction of exploring the work's stream-of-consciousness narrative style, and it fails to dig deeper into more potential existentialist ideas in the work; for instance, there is no elaboration on the new time view and the initiative of things. Therefore, this paper attempts to discover more commonalities between Existentialism and the work and to explore the shared way out proposed by Woolf and Existentialism to the human spiritual dilemma.

## 3. The Absurdity of the World and the Overlap of Time

The world is absurd and disordered; when people recognise such a fact, they fall into a spiral of despair. Sartre saw a contradiction between man's desire for immortality and the limited nature of existence, and a conflict between man's endeavours and the futility of the results [5]. The brutal reality of war and the spiritual deserts it caused give the most striking evidence to this view. At the beginning of the work, Woolf implicitly points out the background of the war through the mouth of the heroine, such as "the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower" and "the cavalcade of red knights" [6]. This being the first scene, the heroine associated with the sight of the spots suffused with the colour of blood. Afterwards, she saw the mark, and it was a relief to her that such a fancy was interrupted. The

article ended with another reference to war, and this time, it would be a male who expressed his distaste for war. His complaints and whining also prove that the effects of war were deep and long-lasting, and the damage to the spirit was immense. Once solid faith was broken, and God could not save people. People were on edge, like "brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office", trapped, repressed and unable to find a way out. People did not believe that there was an ultimate truth in the world, nor did they credit themselves with the ability to realise it. Just as the heroine could have stood up and walked closer to observe the mark, she did not, believing that even if she did, "ten to one she shouldn't be able to say for certain" [6].

In addition, Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narrative, which recorded a woman's fantasies in a haphazard manner, is also a manifestation of absurdity and disorder. Like Heidegger's view of time in *Being and Time*, Woolf also disrupted the linear concept of time by juggling the future, the past and the present through the protagonist's fantasies [7]. If the three forms of time can be intertwined, then there is no clear dividing line between life and death; as soon as people are born, they are running towards death and experiencing it. If people spend their whole lives preparing for death, death is not horrible [8]. As in the heroine's fantasy, the scene after death was depicted as "deluging one with purple and red light". The epiphany at the moment of death produces the most brilliant light, far superior to the "spaces of light and dark" of being alive. During life, the "rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour" of "dim pinks and blues" could only be seen by saints from a high place [6]. It is in the instant of death that truth is seen in its truest colours.

#### 4. The Freedom of Being and the Solitude of Freedom

Sartre suggested that "existence precedes essence", and that the major difference between humans and things is that the essence of a thing precedes its existence, whereas the existence of a human being precedes its essence. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre proposed that humans are not cauliflowers and that their designs for life are subjective [5]. Human beings are created by themselves, so a human being is either completely and always free, or he does not exist. Freedom is a capacity, not an externally given one. People's subjectivity pushes them to be what they want to be [9]. In *The Mark on the Wall*, Woolf described a group of "men of action", urged by "Nature" to act, to become. Because they have chosen to act, they have become "men of action". However, due to the cruelty of reality, the weakness of personal power and the lack of knowledge of existence, such free choice of behaviour often does not lead to an epiphany, and most end in tragedy. The heroine of *The Mark on the Wall* believed that "Nature" prompted people to act, not to help them become, but to stop them from entertaining thoughts that would be as exhausting as overturning the world's orders. "Our slight contempt for men of action" followed, and we attributed their failures to the fact that they could not think. The heroine also repeatedly expressed her ambivalence, thinking she must jump up and see for herself, but ultimately taking no action. She was aware of "Whitaker's Table of Precedency"[6]. Would not be subverted, and that freedom was not a factor in the established rules of society.

People are free to make choices without the constraints of others, and the inevitable consequence of acting alone is loneliness. Furthermore, the "other" is an existence that breaks with the world centred on us. Then, the free choice of the "I" and the "other" will inevitably result in a conflict between the "I" and the "other". Therefore, Sartre put forward the idea that "hell is other people" [5], and the existence of the other is a kind of limitation to the freedom of "I". In *The Mark on the Wall*, the heroine wants to "think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted", but at the moment when she tries to think further, to analyse in detail, she is interrupted and told that *The Mark on the Wall* was a snail. All thinking ceased abruptly, and it even seemed ridiculous. The heroine did not care to know what *The Mark on the Wall* was; she was not curious about the nature of the object but enjoyed imagining and exploring the existence of the thing. It was also her free choice to explore the "rose-shaped blots" and to become a thinker. However, the free choice of the "other" was to express

his distaste for the war with the heroine, pointing out directly that the mark was a snail in essence. They both made their own behavioural choices that were not controlled by others but were contradictory in that the heroine's freedom to think was disturbed. Thus, the existence of the "other" restricts the freedom of the "I", either through unintentional or intentional behaviour, reflecting Sartre's view that "hell is other people" [5]. The "men of action" had the freedom to act but were also restricted and disturbed, contradicting the freedom of those who chose to maintain the established orders. Unfortunately, they ended up failing in the face of the powerful established rules of society.

## 5. The Initiative of the Thing

Starting with Heidegger, Western philosophy has shifted its conception of the "thing" — from the perceived object to the contemplation of existence. From being regarded as objects to be watched, perceived and analysed for the acquisition of knowledge and as the aggregate of materials to satisfy human desires, things have been transformed into partners in the life of human beings in their present survival, as merits of dependence and coexistence, and as sources of contemplation of our existence. From the narrow anthropocentric perspective of humans and things constituting a relationship of externality, there has been a shift to the position that humans and things cross the barriers of externality and establish an inner connection [10]. Woolf has constructed a number of "things" in *The Mark on the Wall*. Those "things" have a strong, active and performative character in this piece, which plays an important role in developing the protagonist's identity.

The "Whitaker's Table of Precedency", as an iconic object of male domination, was repeatedly referred to by the heroine in the text. It was an order set by men, but "half a phantom", to be replaced, ridiculed, and "laughed into the dustbin". Half of what people perceived as "those real standard things" were phantoms that could be subverted and discarded, including the "Whitaker's Table of Precedency". When the heroine realised that the so-called real standard objects are only constructed and do not exist naturally, she developed "a sense of illegitimate freedom". "A small rose leaf" and "the dust on the mantelpiece" were proof of the heroine's "not being a very vigilant housekeeper" [6]. These things help construct the gender identity of the heroine - a woman with a rebellious spirit. She was reluctant to become subservient to men and aspired to subvert the patriarchal society in pursuing freedom from male-designated rules. She did not desire to conform to masculine-set orders and was very conscious that society is not the way it is supposed to be and that patriarchy is not the truth.

In addition to gender identity, the image of a writer with a refined artistic aesthetic was also constructed. In contrast, an old, fake portrait of a wealthy woman hung in the old house of a man who enjoyed boasting about art. The man obviously had no knowledge of art but was still attached to it. The heroine's identity as a writer is also confirmed by "three pale blue canisters of book-binding tools". The heroine also believed that the barren image of people in the "looking-glass" [6], was a direction that future novelists would explore.

The author has established a rich array of things, which might seem to be cluttered, but in fact, all serve the centre, and all play an important role in constructing the identity of the protagonist. The heroine narrated the representative of patriarchy in a cynical tone and was not ashamed of proving that she was a woman who did not match the social norms; she drew a line with middle-class aesthetic interests and revealed her views on writing between the lines. The author never explicitly pointed out the identity, personality and other characteristics of the heroine, but the image of a female writer with a rebellious spirit and elegant artistic interests has already jumped onto the paper.

## 6. Conclusions

*The Mark on the Wall* was created during World War I. The stream-of-consciousness narrative seems to be disorganised, but it highlights the profoundness of the work's ideas. Sartre's absurdity of the

world, the relationship between existence and essence, and "hell is other people"; Heidegger's non-linear view of time, the idea that things are the thought of existence, and other representative views of Existentialism, can all be found in *The Mark on the Wall*. Although the article is not long, the image of a female writer with a rebellious spirit and elegant aesthetics is vividly presented. Woolf thoroughly demonstrated the spiritual wasteland and plight of the post-war people, trying to find a way out for people in the era of precariousness. This coincides with the viewpoint of Existentialism. People have the freedom of choice and are bound to face loneliness. Moreover, the freedom of choice for all is inevitably going to result in a number of conflicts. Accepting that the world is absurd, living towards death and seeking the true nature may be the exit for people. This paper favours expanding the exploration of Woolf's works from the perspective of Existentialism, but existentialist ideas are complex and profound. Therefore, this paper only selected the views of representative figures Sartre and Heidegger, and the study of Existentialism is not comprehensive and thorough enough. It is hoped that in the future there will be a more profound and holistic perspective to explore the existentialist tendency in Woolf's works.

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