

Article

Lateral Reality: Stream of (Un) Consciousness and Surrealism in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract: The examination of what constitutes reality has long been a focal point of inquiry across various academic disciplines and intellectual pursuits, including philosophy, psychology, literature, and cognitive science. Through Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, this paper examines the dynamics of stream of consciousness, Surrealism, and the complex interplay between perceived and objective reality. Delving into the intersectionality of these themes, it reconceptualises Woolf's narrative with philosophical and psychoanalytical perspectives. It draws upon André Breton's notion of Surrealism and René Descartes' fundamental question of existence, which serves as a foundation for exploring the nature of reality. Descartes' inquiries into doubt and certainty prompt reflections on subjective experience, thereby illuminating how Woolf's characters grapple with their existence within the narrative. The paper also incorporates Platonic and Aristotelian theories of 'Forms' and 'forms' to investigate the role of art and literature as a means of expression, alongside Sigmund Freud's insights into the human psyche, which dissect the influence of the conscious and unconscious mind on perception. Through these interdisciplinary approaches, the paper explores and reinterprets how Woolf challenges notions of reality, prompting readers to engage with the tangible and intangible aspects of life.

Keywords: art; perceived; psyche; surrealism; reality

Introduction

After World War I, Surrealism emerged in Europe, where artists adopted innovative techniques to represent the unconscious mind (Barnes 508). Prior to this, Dadaism emerged as a significant artistic and literary movement originating in Western Europe between 1916 and 1923. The artistic movements of Dadaism and Surrealism arose as reactions against the traditional artistic and socio-cultural norms of their time.

Dadaism challenged conventional art norms with unique imagery, emphasising antirationalism, while Surrealism explored the unconscious mind to reveal the complex motivations of humans. Despite different artistic objectives, both movements rejected physical reality. Surrealism sought meaning beyond appearances, using the psychic unconscious for creativity (Lagana 150). With this aspect in mind, the Surrealist movement is essential in understanding the concept of stream of consciousness in the selected novel.

The dynamics of intersectionality in Surrealism, specifically the interplay between the unconscious and the conscious, are prominent in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). With a three-part structure, each section depicts the intermingling of the characters' unconscious and conscious states. The first section, titled "The Window", takes place before World War I, and readers are introduced to the family of the Ramsays and their guests who reside in the summer house on the Isle of Skye. The story is narrated through the thought processes of the house guests and seamlessly jumps from one character's psyche to another. Their varying perceptions of reality are evident as the characters are shaped by certain ideologies, such as Mr Ramsay's preoccupation with Philosophy, Mrs Ramsay's conformist view of the world and Lily Briscoe's rejection of such conformity. The second section, "Time Passes", is narrated through the memory of the housekeeper, Mrs McNab. This section examines the interrelationship between memory and the unconscious as repositories of what is considered authentic. In the third section, "The Lighthouse", the Ramsays and their guests revisit the Isle, and the narrative style reverts to the stream of consciousness approach. This section depicts Woolf's allusion to the free flow of thoughts and the significance of the search for meaning. In all three sections of the novel, the persistence of reality perceptions and the functions of unconsciousness and consciousness are palpable.

Aspects of Surrealism in Stream of Consciousness

The Surrealist movement, introduced by André Breton (1924), marked a departure from established perceptions of reality. Surrealism integrates concepts from psychoanalysis, emphasising dreams and the unconscious as pivotal sources of examination to reveal hidden aspects of the psyche (Fraser, 2020). In his book (1924), Breton argues that objective reality is created by the structure of a conformative society, limiting the possibility of a plurality of actions (3-4). Congruently, the fundamental purpose of Surrealism is to redefine reality, and its artworks aim to evoke individuals' "functioning of thought" (26). It includes what Breton calls "automatism," of creating art from the unconscious (230). The artist notes any words or thoughts that arise, aiming to connect with readers' unconscious minds through the free flow of thoughts (Singh 21).

Parallel to this notion, stream of consciousness is a literary device first employed in the late 1800s. The technique is attributed to William James (1890), where he notes that consciousness, "...is nothing jointed; it flows... In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" (526). The sequence of conventions regarding chronology and the hero's journey arc is abandoned, depicting a nonlinear, unconscious state that precedes the mind's organisation of senses. For this

reason, conscious thoughts often fall short of direct cognition in terms of coherence and unity (494-498). The keyword 'stream' expressly signifies this transition (Prakash 3).

In *To the Lighthouse*, the elaborate development of the internal reaction to external events occupies far more space than the execution of the action or the actual events. Yanxia Sang (2010) notes Woolf's proficient use of literary devices, such as guiding phrases and parentheses, to overcome the drawbacks of stream of consciousness (174-175). One such example can be seen from the excerpt of the third section, "The Lighthouse" chapter two, where parentheses are used to denote suggestions of perspectives:

"Such expeditions," said Mr. Ramsay, scraping the ground with his toe, "are very painful." Still, Lily said nothing. (She is a stock, she is a stone, he said to himself.) "They are very exhausting," he said, looking, with a sickly look that nauseated her (he was acting, she felt, this great man was dramatising himself), at his beautiful hands. It was horrible, it was indecent. Would they never come, she asked, for she could not sustain this enormous weight of sorrow, support these heavy draperies of grief (he had assumed a pose of extreme decrepitude; he even tottered a little as he stood there) a moment longer. (Woolf 250)

Incorporating parentheses enables Woolf to blend inner thoughts with external observations, emphasising that the stream of consciousness technique offers a layered, nonlinear approach to perception. Additionally, in "The Window" chapter seventeen, Mrs Ramsay questions and analyses what she has done with her life and her marriage:

But, what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it... At the far end was her husband, sitting down, all in a heap, frowning. What at? She did not know. She did not mind. She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him. She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy—there—and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it. It has all come to an end, she thought, while they came in one after another... Moreover, she waited passively for someone to answer her, for something to happen. However, this is not a thing, she thought, ladling out soup, that one says. (Woolf 152-153)

This excerpt suggests that Mrs Ramsay's ability to express her inner feelings is hindered by the social conventions of marriage, gender roles and Mr Ramsay's inflexible personality. It is discernible that she experiences a conflict between her thoughts and actions. This contradiction of the unconscious and conscious impulses is expressed by utilising the stream of consciousness. Through Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, Woolf sheds light on the social conditions of her time. The significant disparity in gender equality during the Victorian era (1837-1901) meant that women were often denied autonomy in making pivotal life decisions. This systemic power imbalance granted men virtually complete control over the external dimensions of life, encompassing work, politics, and social interactions. The essential roles women fulfilled

within the home, acting as caregivers and intellectual contributors, essentially went unnoticed by society. Reinterpreting Woolf's literature reveals the tensions faced by women during this era (Prakash 3) and how they persist to date. As such, readers can grasp why Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), professed that the 'androgynous mind' must be encouraged for writers as it promotes the facilitation of artistic work without gender biases (71-75). By scrutinising her characterisations and narrative techniques, readers glean insights into the far-reaching effects of societal restrictions on women's lives and aspirations.

Perceptions of Reality

The notion that perception shapes one's reality permeates contemporary society, where personal truth and factual truth are often intertwined. Faye (2006) outlines two realist perspectives: the external world is objectively real, independent of beliefs, and it is purely physical, devoid of sensory or mental attributes (2-3). Diverging from this tangible nature of Reality, René Descartes (2008) argues that there is always room for uncertainty. He presents a methodological approach to scepticism (13-17) and proposes that, while it is impossible to dispute existence, a sense of concreteness can be perceived within the mind. Since consciousness can only be located 'within', the factual convictions of the 'real' world can also be illusory (Morgan 403). In this sense, according to Descartes, the two ways the mind can strengthen itself are by directing focused and non-judgmental attention to the world. This perspective is closely aligned with Woolf's approach to writing, which emphasises impartiality. By adopting this approach, Woolf encapsulates the interconnectedness of human experience.

Following Plato's allegory in *The Republic* (2000), reality is likened to a collection of shadowy figures projected on a cave wall, illuminated by a fire against which one turns their back. So enamoured by the shadow figures, one does not turn to see the light source, let alone walk out of the cave to see the world outside (220-227). This concept alludes to Plato's theory of 'Forms' (1975), which posits that Forms are abstract and perfect ideas that transcend time and space (64-66). However, they cannot be termed reality since they are imitations of it. Thus, according to Plato, the human perception of reality is twice removed from the truth itself, suggesting that art, or more specifically, poetry, is an entity that is thrice removed from the truth as it is simply the imitation of something that is twice removed from the truth.

On the other hand, Aristotle argues that observing art is just as essential to studying modern science, as it aids in understanding the self and the world (Washburn 67-78). Though he was taught in Plato's school and respected Plato, Aristotle believed that Plato's theory of Forms was markedly abstract. Aristotle concluded that analysis of the abstract comes second to observation and experience. He proposes the idea of 'forms' in *Physics*, where he views the world through the lens of empiricism. Hence, Aristotle's work on 'forms' argues that art is not thrice removed from reality; rather, it is the physical embodiment of the artist's perception of reality, reflecting the truth as humankind perceives it (7-9). Thus, art forms represent the perceived reality without negating realism, allowing individuals to express and interpret their unique comprehension of the world around them.

Subsequently, stream of consciousness is a writer's expression, conveyed through the narrator's perspective in an attempt to capture their reality. This is evident in the characters' various interactions with themselves and others, as they repress the fear of the ephemeral nature of their existence, each vying for a legacy or a tangible mark of permanence that will not fade with their lived existence. At the end of the novel, only Lily Briscoe forms a painting that reflects a perceived reality, a piece of surrealism that blends with realism (the objective painting) through the portrait of Mrs Ramsay, "...she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture...It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (Woolf 332-333). Through art, Lily Briscoe created a legacy that may well outlive her mortal existence, capturing the essence of the woman she admired. Thus, her painting is a mimic of reality that captures a moment in time, a piece of art conveying her perceived truth.

Character Analysis of Mr Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe

According to Sigmund Freud (1961), the human psyche is composed of three aspects- the id, which represents the unconscious, primitive side of human nature; the ego, which is the conscious element of the human mind that one presents one with; and the superego, which contains morals and social norms around which individuals function as a member of the society (19-39). Consciousness is influenced by the unconscious and social norms, reflecting the manifestation of the id and superego on the ego. This relationship suggests that the ego is not a passive element, but rather an active agent that mediates between the competing forces of the unconscious mind and the moral principle.

The interaction between the id, ego, and superego is exemplified by Mr Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe. Mr Ramsay is a man of philosophy who spends his days among books written by people who have contemplated the universe. He presents himself, that is, his ego, in such a manner that he is a dignified man of society, and prominent philosophers dictate his understanding of life. The manifestation of Mr Ramsay's ego through the imposition of the superego is evident, where he meets the expectations of social structure. Yet, readers were made aware of his deepest fear, which was to be forgotten without a legacy. This primitive side of his repressed fear, representing his id, leads to a controlling approach to art and a pursuit of attention from those around him. This also indicates that his id often overpowers his superego.

Secondly, Mrs Ramsay is portrayed as a respectable woman of society. She adheres to social conventions, upholds traditional gender norms in her beliefs, and hopes for Lily to get married. These behaviours reflect the superego within her conscious mind (her ego). On the other hand, she is also depicted as melancholic and partly nihilistic in her worldview, a manifestation of her unconscious state. However, it is portrayed that Mrs Ramsay often persevered through such trials. She enjoys hosting and setting up dinners as a way to express herself through an activity she loves. It can be inferred that Mrs Ramsay's superego often influences her ego over her id.

Through the influence of Mr and Mrs Ramsay, Lily Briscoe comes to understand both the philosophical approach to life that Mr Ramsay embodies and the care that Mrs Ramsay puts into hosting others. In a sense, the two characters can be seen as the impression of a superego in her ego. This outside force shaped the mental landscape of the young woman as she struggled from one colour to another at the beginning of the novel, to the end, where she becomes someone who can paint out a particular perception of reality through her art. Thus, the presence and manifestation of the unconscious and consciousness in the human psyche are evident in these characters.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the origins of the Surrealist movement and its connection to the stream-of-consciousness technique. It also depicted a philosophical notion of reality and a psychoanalytic view of individuals' psyche through the characters. It has been observed that the stream of consciousness technique does not follow a linear narrative and does not impose a definite way of seeing things. These theories have been integrated to reconceptualise the novel and explore the inner workings of Mr Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Through these interpretations, it can be established that the stream of consciousness technique realistically portrays the characters' inner state of mind; however, it is also apparent that the characters' consciousness, i.e., the way each analysed character perceives and captures reality, stems from the mechanism of the unconscious. Ultimately, the study reveals the complexities of reality experienced by Woolf's characters, as well as the interplay between perception, consciousness, and the broader philosophical framework within which they exist.

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