

Post-Impressionism in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

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The Waves is the most innovative stream-of-consciousness novel of Virginia Woolf. This paper mainly studies Post-Impressionistic means of artistic expression in the novel and the important function these artistic methods put on literature. It concludes the importance of exploring characters' inner world in literary works and focusing on people's mental condition in modern society.

Keywords: Post-Impressionism, the contrast between light and color, stream of consciousness, inner world

Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is reputed as one of the most remarkable novelists of stream of consciousness. In *The Waves* (1931), she depicts six lives across nine episodes from childhood to middle-age. Pictures painted in colors and light symbolize different stages of the six lives. Their real mind hidden behind their bodies and appearances is expressed with the flow of the consciousness. And "the moment of being" is applied to show the mortal meaning of the physical time.

Post-Impressionists prefer to using tiny dots of color systematically, restoring a sense of order and structure to produce "an art of the mind concerned with the emotional appreciation of form qualities" (Denvir, 1992, p. 25). Woolf believes that writers should be also involved and novelists should have responsibility and ability to convey the unstable, unknown, and unlimited spiritual world. She therefore creates an innovative literary structure. *The Waves* is a typical success of the literary attempt.

Studies concerning *The Waves* are mainly about the theory of fiction, death complex, Eco-criticism, Post-Modernism, and life poetics. "Memory, the Root of Life: Life Writing in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*" by professor GAO Fen (2011) is a typical thesis on life poetic, in which she elaborates a life circle of artistic form and life symbol. Besides, painting and musical features are hot topics concerning the novel. This paper mainly focuses on Post-Impressionism. The purpose is to urge modern people to explore human beings' inner world more while pursuing economic prosperity.

Post-Impressionism

Post-Impressionism is considered as the origin of the modern Western art. Its major representatives take

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notice that painting is not only to imitate the objective world, but also to reflect subjective emotion through the objective world. Aurier¹ generalizes traits of the new art as “ideological”, “symbolist”, “synthetic”, “subjective”, and “decorative” (Denvir, 1992, p. 144).

To echo with the trend, writers exploit a similar writing method and Virginia Woolf is one of them. They translate Post-Impressionistic skills in painting to literary creation. Words are used to paint polychrome pictures and create a stream-of-consciousness technique of expression. They use color words to express emotions, atmosphere, and thoughts. Moreover, line and shadow, the intimate relationship between human and nature, and expressing humans' emotion through colors are also embodied in literary creation.

Artistic Approaches in *The Waves*

The Contrast Between Color and Light

The Waves is composed of nine pastoral interludes, describing the continuous progress of the sun's rising, interwoven with nine sections of interacted soliloquies by Bernard, Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, Susan, and Louis from childhood to maturity. And “the interlude ‘Time Passes’ transforms story into novel by relating past to future in a time-series, creating a post-impressionist ‘modern fiction’” (Banfield, 2003).

In prefaces, Woolf shows readers nine independent pictures of the sun's rising and the pictures constitute complete scenery with colors and light interlaced to paint a series of the sun's movement on the sea shore.

The sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. (Woolf, 2000, p. 3)

“White”, “green”, and “yellow” give a vivid description of the beginning of a day on the sea shore. Color words are frequently used to both give readers a visual feast and set a basis for the following description of life.

The light touched something green in the window corner and made it a lump of emerald, a cave of pure green like stoneless fruit. It sharpened the edges of chairs and tables and stitched white tablecloths with fine gold wires. (Woolf, 2000, p. 15)

“A lump of emerald” is used to elaborate the feeling when “the light touched something green”. Together with the light, “white cloths” and “fine gold wires” form a strong contrast between color and light to express the contradiction existing in a harmonious scene.

Stream of Consciousness

In addition, Woolf takes advantage of feminine vision to examine the world, giving color words feelings and forms to produce imagery. She depicts life with color to embellish figures' inner world. As for Rhoda, the most alienated of the group, who has lost her father at a young age, Woolf adopts dead colors to demonstrate her pessimism and deep inferiority. In the following sentences, “I sink down on the black plumes of sleep” (Woolf, 2000, p. 14) and “I was brown like a feather” (Woolf, 2000, p. 34), “grey” and “brown” both convey Rhoda's gloominess and set backgrounds for her suicide. While for Jinny, addicted to hedonism, bright colors are employed to symbolize her pursuit of stimulus and materialism. In the sentence “I see a crimson tassel, twisted with gold threads” (Woolf, 2000, p. 4), “crimson” and “gold” make readers feel her optimism free.

Stream of consciousness injects novels with new vigor and turns over a new page for literature. Novelists

¹ A Symbolist poet, published an article entitled “Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin” in the *Mercure de France* in 1891. In the article, he defined the purpose and nature of Post-Impressionism.

make it a literary genre by deliberately elaborating conception and embodying figures' chaotic thinking. Post-Impressionists emphasize reflection of inner world through abstraction and vagueness. Thus, stream of consciousness is an aspect Post-Impressionism reflecting on literature. Stream-of-consciousness fictions creatively use the trinity principle of art-time, consciousness, and skill. Figures' decades of complex experience is compressed into couples of hours or even several minutes. Woolf endows six characters with rights to express their original feelings and rolls them into one to give life the most direct and all-round statement.

Besides, the whole novel is constituted by indirect interior monologues of six characters. And within their individual monologues, performances are presented on the stage of life, while the author's task is to guide readers to read monologues. At the end of the novel, Bernard acts as the biographer of the different identities and he is the narrator—the combination of the six characters. *The Waves* is written after World War One, while the war deepens people's disillusionment to the Western world. In the novel, Woolf sets a blurry and distinct setting for the six characters and endows each of them with different backgrounds to incarnate social consciousness. Actually, six characters are six aspects of life. Percival's death, as the symbol of World War One, divides the novel into two parts. The death shifts six characters' attitudes and mind, making them realize nothingness suffering in mind while feeling lucky for their survival.

In addition, Woolf adopts free association in *The Waves*, both continuous and discontinuous free association. She excels at capturing characters' moments of consciousness and expressing characters' inward world through conscious activities. She also uses montage to edit and combine some life scenes of different time and space in the same moment. She puts six characters into the juncture of time and space to set force life and combines them into the picture through overlapping and shifting perspectives.

The Moment of Being

"The moment of being" is commonly considered existing only in Woolf's short novels. In these works, characters' age, appearance, and occupation are negligible and their momentary imaginary feeling and meditation are essential. Woolf names the moment she demonstrates "the moment of being" or "the moment of importance". It is in the moment when characters are responding to the real world and comprehending the true meaning of the life itself. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness fictions reflect the nature of life and review the truth of life through exploring characters' psychological change in a "moment of being".

In *The Waves*, Woolf divides one day into nine parts, meanwhile she divides life into nine sections. Each part and each section is a moment of being, in which nature is changing and life is special and continuous. For example, in the fifth part of the novel, the moment six characters get the evil tiding of Percival, each of them expresses their mind. Rhoda suddenly realizes that everything in the world is so terrible, ugly, and full of "terror". Neville, however, feels distressed and the world "crashed". Bernard needs "silence", "to save one hour to consider what has happened" and to know "what death has done".

Connotations of Applying Post-Impressionism

Symbolism

Post-Impressionism focuses on bright colors and glorious light, mainly painters' inner feeling and momentary thoughts. Thus, symbolism consists one of the purposes of Post-Impressionism. Woolf expresses life through description of nature and characters' interior monologues. She uses Post-Impressionistic writing skills to state life through symbolic imagery, which is a purpose of Woolf to show the true meaning of life.

In *The Waves*, Woolf makes the whole novel full of symbolism through Post-Impressionistic techniques. The passage has not only macroscopic symbolism, for instance, ups and downs of the waves symbolizing the eternity of life cycle, but also microscopic symbolism, for instance, Neville's leaving school and getting off the train symbolizing his setting foot on society and entering into the life. Besides, Woolf does not adopt the one-way development model. She plants seeds of the decline in the process of development and gives hints of regeneration in the process of falling. In the following sentence, "Some petals had fallen in the garden. They lay shell-shaped on the earth" (Woolf, 2000, p. 102), Woolf compares withered petals to shells to show their similar shapes and the circle of life, for shell is a signal of regeneration.

Characters' Inner World

No matter in painting or in literature, manifesting human beings' inner consciousness is considered to be the main purpose of art. In *The Waves*, Woolf comes into characters' inner world and excavates their abstruse consciousness. Both temporariness of individual's life and permanency of the whole life are demonstrated in the description of six characters' growing course. Woolf depicts them vividly through their flows of consciousness and the impact brought by Percival's death. Eventually, they walk to the same destination from six instinct directions and face the death with different poses.

For Bernard, rhetorical flourishes methodically lettered seem to be the most interesting thing he possesses. Appearing as the leader in the statement of consciousness, he refers to life's pleasure more than once, but he realizes the seamy side of life, including transience of lives, the passage of time. And he expresses all of these through his statement of consciousness. For example, in the gathering of Hampton Court, he unfolds "Drop upon drop, silence falls" (Woolf, 2000, p. 127).

For Louis, Australian accent makes him feel inferior, but he is ambitious, concerned with status and mastery. When he succeeds, he expresses that "I have signed my name already twenties times" (Woolf, 2000, p. 93). He pursues order and control. When he looks back his childhood, he mentions "now we march, two by two, orderly, processional, into chapel" (Woolf, 2000, p. 18). Also, there is some melancholy in his nature, making him desperate for social acceptance and against his Bourgeois origins.

Conclusion

The Waves reveals that social environment plays a vital role in controlling figures' ups and downs, and the complex and original consciousness is the most loyal reflection of figures' nature. For human beings in modern society, fast life rhythm makes their inner world delicate. Therefore, it is so urgent for people to concern the mental development and material development should keep pace with spiritual development. But as for the settlement of the problem, literature should take the first step as a leading, which is what this paper mainly refers to.

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