

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Perception of Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf
Vnímání času v románech Virginie Woolfové

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Studijní obor (Subject):

Anglistika – amerikanistika

Praha, Květen 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On this page, I wish to express my gratitude to my supervisor, PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D., for his valuable advice, helpful guidance and critical insights.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Virginia Woolfová, modernizmus, čas, Bergson, vnímanie, dichotómia

KEY WORDS

Virginia Woolf, modernism, time, Bergson, perception, dichotomy

ABSTRACT

The predominant objective of this thesis is an analysis of the representation of time in three novels written by a modernist writer Virginia Woolf. This thesis studies dichotomy between a psychological, inner time and time imposed on characters by the external world. It is claimed that the juxtaposition of these concepts in the novels *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse* can be compared with notions of *l'étendu* and *durée*, represented by a French philosopher Henri Bergson. The notion of the subjective nature of *durée* is based on its quality of existing internally, while being independent of the external time. This characteristics is contrasted with the notion of *l'étendu* that can be described as the external time, enforced by its mechanical division of time into units. The juxtaposition between the two types of time are evident in the studied novels, nevertheless, each discussed novel employs time in a different manner, providing multiple points of view on the same problem. The introductory part of the thesis outlines possible roots of Woolf's occupation with the concept of time, claiming that the accurate representation of time was not only a literary concern but also a philosophical one. Besides Henri Bergson, key ideas of Paul Ricoeur and William James are mentioned as well. The thesis also comments on the influence of the Bloomsbury Group, and the influence of Marcel Proust whose direct impact on Woolf's works is mentioned in her diary. While introductory part acknowledges notions and concepts of other writers, Woolf's work is treated as a unique representation of her own beliefs and perceptions on the concept of time and adjacent motifs.

ABSTRAKT

Hlavným cieľom tejto bakalárskej práce je analýza reprezentácie času v troch románoch modernistickej spisovateľky Virginie Woolfovej. Bakalárska práca skúma dichotómiu psychologického, vnútorného času a času vonkajšieho sveta, ktorému musia hlavné postavy čeliť. Téza tejto práce tvrdí, že juxtapozícia týchto dvoch konceptov v románoch *Pani Dallowayová*, *Vlny* a *K majáku* môže byť prirovnaná k pojmom *l'étendu* a *durée*, ktorých hlavným predstaviteľom bol francúzsky filozof Henri Bergson. Subjektívna povaha *durée* spočíva v jeho schopnosti existovať vnútornne a bez viazanosti na externý čas. Táto charakteristika kontrastuje s konceptom *l'étendu*, ktorý sa dá opísť ako vonkajší čas mechanicky rozdelený na časové jednotky. Porovnanie týchto dvoch konceptov môžeme pozorovať v skúmaných dielach, pričom treba podotknúť, že každý román pracuje s konceptom času inak, a teda reprezentuje viacero pohľadov na ten istý problém. Úvodná časť práce vymedzuje pravdepodobný pôvod Woolfovej záujmu o čas a tvrdí, že precízna reprezentácia času bola záujmom nielen literárny, ale aj filozofickým. Okrem Henriho Bergsona sa spomínajú aj kľúčové myšlienky Paula Ricoeura a Williama Jamesa. Bakalárska práca tiež zmieňuje vplyv intelektuálnej skupiny „Bloomsbury Group“ a Marcela Prousta, ktorého priamy vplyv Woolfová spomína vo svojom denníku. Úvodná časť bakalárskej práce sice vyzdvihuje aj myšlienky a teórie iných spisovateľov, ale s Woolfovej dielom pracuje ako s unikátnou reprezentáciou jej vlastných domnienok a postrehov týkajúcich sa času a príslušných motívov.

Table of contents

1. Introduction	7
2. Modernism	9
2.1. Theoretical Framework.....	9
2.1.2. The Philosophy of Time	10
2.1.3. The Representation of Time	12
2.2. Virginia Woolf and Modernism	15
2.2.1. Virginia Woolf: The Bloomsbury Group, Marcel Proust and Henri Bergson	17
2.2.2. Virginia Woolf: The Representation of Time	20
4. To the Lighthouse.....	35
5. The Waves.....	45
5.1. Time and its Impact on the Theme of Identity	53
6. Conclusion.....	58

1. Introduction

The aim of this bachelor thesis is a study of the representation of time in the works of Virginia Woolf. Woolf's interest in the accuracy of description and subsequent portrayal of the nature of time can be observed in her diaries. However, the root of this preoccupation can be traced to the period that Woolf was born to: modernism. Virginia Woolf was born into the last years of the Victorian era, nevertheless, she experienced some of the most significant changes marking the beginnings of the new period. The era of modernism is dated from the 1890s to 1930s; and it is significant to point out some of the greatest thinkers of the period that might have influenced Woolf's own ideas and beliefs. This thesis predominantly focuses on the ideas of Henri Bergson, more specifically on his dichotomy between natural and mechanical time and its use in three novels written by Virginia Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. Henri Bergson differentiated the internal time, called *durée*, from the external mechanical time, *l'étendu*. While *durée* can be summarized as the depiction of the inner flux of time, the latter is a representation of the mechanical division of time, presented by the division of time in hours, days, weeks, and eventually years. A similar tendency to distinguish between these types of time can be observed in the writings of Virginia Woolf.

Even though a certain inspiration with the Bergsonian concept of time can be marked, it would be impossible to claim that Woolf used only this dichotomy to represent the flow of time. All three studied novels provide multiple points of view on time and its flow. The understanding of time differs according to the nature of the characters, their intellectual beliefs, and conducts. While some of the protagonists grasp the abstract flow of time with ease, some of them struggle to merge their own inner flux with that imposed on them by the external world. The impossibility to deal with time is represented by a particular motif which can be observed in all three novels: death. Death is of great importance when discussing time and its flow. Its instalment in the novels provides the characters, as well as the readers, with a representation of

the ever-moving cycle of life. Merciless external time is hence not represented only by the mechanical clocks but also by the power of the outer and indifferent flow of time.

Even though the representation and flux of time is a significant motif in all three mentioned novels, it is rather impossible to make a general statement about the way Woolf dealt with the representation in these novels. Each one of the novels is a unique work of art and each of them incorporates different elements that make the work a very meticulous and precise observation of the flow of life.

2. Modernism

2.1. Theoretical Framework

As hinted in the introduction, Woolf's tendency to analyse time and its flow can be found in the period that she was born to. The epoch between the 1890s and 1930s saw life as it used to be speedily changing and leaving behind the traditions and beliefs of the past. Modernism was not just a singular aesthetic movement: it was a period that changed the perception of almost every aspect of life. New concepts and theories were emerging in psychology, physics, philosophy, anthropology, and the visual arts. Bradbury and McFarlane point out the nature of modernism and its ability to take us “behind familiar reality”¹ and to break away “from familiar functions of language and conventions of form.”² Modernism saw the rise of many important personalities and theories which would shape the world in yet unknown ways. With the publication of Sigmund Freud’s works, the perception of the human mind and its subconsciousness altered drastically. The power of religion was threatened by Friedrich Nietzsche’s essays and his declarations concerning the death of God. Modernism was, nonetheless, not only a period intellectually demanding, it was also a time of scientific and technical revolutions. Max Planck’s quantum theory and Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity were also partaking in the creation of the world’s appearance which was not imaginable before. Bradbury describes the world during modernism as “world changed and reinterpreted.”³ Such an immense change of the overall atmosphere came with the desire to amend the artistic representation accordingly: artists were in need for new ways of reflecting the world around them.

In the foreword to *The Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell discusses cultural and social changes that required new creative approaches for the representation of reality. The

¹ Malcom Bradbury, and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism 1890-1930* (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 24.

² Bradbury and McFarlane 24.

³ Bradbury and McFarlene 27.

search for such means of portrayal was also characteristic in literature: “The period from 1850 to 1930 probably saw more varied experiments in literature, poetry, music, and painting—if not more great masterpieces—than any previous period we have known.”⁴ Life as known in the Victorian period utterly dissolved and the artists needed to deal with new concepts, innovations and even vocabulary. Bradbury writes that these changes are the reason a modern novel “becomes the novel of fine consciousness; it escapes the conventions of fact-giving’ and story-telling.”⁵

Above all the significant theories and ideas, there was one specific entity whose representation bothered both artists and philosophers equally: time. As Daniel Bell points out: “the problem of time (in Bergson, Proust, and Joyce) was the primary aesthetic concern of the first decades of this century.”⁶ It is therefore significant to trace the roots of ideas and beliefs that might have shaped Woolf’s own approach to time.

2.1.2. The Philosophy of Time

One of the most important personalities of the period of modernism was doubtlessly a philosopher whose main concerns, besides free will, were the dimensions of space and time. It was Henri Bergson whose innovative theories and ideas influenced the thinking of the twentieth century. In *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, Gillies states that: “In Time and Free Will Bergson attacks traditional depictions of time. Time has become spatialized; according to Bergson, by introducing space into our perception of duration, [we corrupt] at its very source our feeling of outer and inner change, of movement, and of freedom.”⁷ The problem for Bergson was the division of life into units. Such division prevented awareness of life’s true nature. Our day is divided into twenty-four hours and weeks, months, and years are divided as well.

⁴ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) 22.

⁵ Bradbury and McFarlane 408.

⁶ Bell 107.

⁷ Marry Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996) 11.

However, this division is not natural; being conventional for human beings, it works as a means for artificial control of the natural environment. One of the key terms in Bergson's philosophy is the concept of internal time referred to as "durée". In *Time and Free Will*, he claims that:

There are [...] two possible conceptions of time, the one free from all alloy, the other surreptitiously bringing in the idea of space. Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states [...] it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary, it would no longer endure. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.⁸

Durée can be thus comprehended as an internal time living in its own realm while being irrelevant to the outer world. In other words, since *durée* is a continuous flow its division is not natural. Furthermore, Bergson states that: "duration properly so called has no moments which are identical or external to one another, being essentially heterogeneous, continuous, and with no analogy to number."⁹ In a sense, the perception is always bound with the past, as well as the future, hence the division might eventually result in the reduction of the experience. Real inner time is not quantitative, but rather qualitative in nature. Gillies explains this on an example of "common experience of having time collapse or expand when an individual is under some stress; or of having time seem to fly when we want to prolong some particular experience, yet crawl when we would prefer to see the experience finished."¹⁰ When measuring time, it moves in its precise manner, each hour lasts sixty minutes but our natural time is oftentimes very much different and does not correspond with the artificial, divided time-flow.

The mechanical artificial time is another key concept in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. He labelled this time as *l'étendu*. Even though "the real living goes on in the indivisible realm of *durée*,"¹¹ the mechanical clock-time is important in the external world that

⁸ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (New York: Dover Publications, 2001) 100.

⁹ Bergson 120.

¹⁰ Gillies 12.

¹¹ Gillies 12.

we also live in. For example, Martin Hilský in his *Modernisté* points out that the second most important thing after the invention of clocks in the 14th century was actually the unification and standardization of time at the end of the 19th century. He also states that the public interest in time was immense. People were obsessed with time and during this period, many scientific and even pseudoscientific books about time were published. Before its standardization, time was partaking in the chaotic and fragmentary representation of world while after the standardization, the world became a much more organized place.¹²

Henri Bergson certainly had an important place when it comes to the theories of time. Nevertheless, the form and presentation of the flow of time were significant as well. It is thus imperative to mention another significant personality: William James. William James can be described as a very influential psychologist and thinker. His *Principles of Psychology* (1890) are essential not only for the studies of human psychology but for literary studies as well. While discussing consciousness, William James comes with a term that has a significant place in the writings of modernism: "In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life."¹³ The term stream of consciousness represents a technique commonly used during this period. One of the most famous examples of its use is probably James Joyce's *Ulysses*, nevertheless, this method is significant even in the works of many other authors, including Virginia Woolf. As will be discussed later on, Woolf used this technique when portraying the inner flow of characters and their subsequent perception of time.

2.1.3. The Representation of Time

While discussing the representation of time, it is important to mention another significant philosopher of the 20th century: Paul Ricoeur. The subject of Ricoeur's study was not only the perception of time but also the possibilities of discourse concerning the

¹² Martin Hilský, *Modernisté* (Praha: Torst, 1995) 17.

¹³ William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol 1. (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1890) 239.

representation of time. As Bergson and James, he also did not understand thoughts as separate entities, but rather as a flow. In his work, the metaphor of such flux was connected with the process of thinking. In *Time and Narrative*, he writes:

It is thanks to a present expectation that future things are present to us as things to come. We have a "pre-perception" (*praesensio*) of this which enables us to "foretell" them (*praenuntio*). Expectation is thus the analogue to memory. It consists of an image that already exists, in the sense that it precedes the event that does not yet exist (*nondum*). However, this image is not an impression left by things past but a "sign" and a "cause" of future things which are, in this way, anticipated, foreseen, foretold, predicted, proclaimed beforehand.¹⁴

It can be claimed that according to Paul Ricoeur, actions in the text do not happen after something else but because of something else. The link with time is evident: in the narrative, one event does not have to be connected with the past only or with the future only. It is connected with every action that has occurred or will occur. Ricoeur saw a correlation between the act of narration and temporal human experience: "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence."¹⁵

As was already mentioned, the tendencies to capture or portray time as one of the main points of discussion in the literary works were characteristic for the period of modernism. These impulses were based on new scientific observations and discoveries associated with the Second Industrial Revolution that changed and shaped the world. Ronald Schleifer claims that at the turn of the 20th century, the marks of time took on three particular forms:

One of these marks was a transformation in the canons of understanding, a transformation of exactly what constituted a satisfying explanation of experience and value. A second mark of time at the turn of the twentieth century is the ubiquitous and often unnoticed transformation in the experience of time that conditioned the apocalyptic sense of the "new" – "crisis consciousness" – articulated throughout literary Modernism in America and England. A third was a transformation in the understanding of history as continuous [...]¹⁶

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) 11.

¹⁵ Ricoeur 52.

¹⁶ Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 10.

The changes which Schleifer points out are observable in many literary works, predominantly those of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. However, experimentations and new techniques concerning the representation of time in literary works can be observed even in authors who were not defining themselves as modernist writers even though they were active during the period of modernism. Martin Hilský mentions, for example, H.G. Wells and his novel *The Time Machine* in which the time traveller travels to future: to the year 802701.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he is not interested in time from a psychological point of view, but from the technical and scientific one, while, for example, Virginia Woolf portrays the internal and psychological perception of time which changes according to circumstances and inner state of the characters. Schleifer sees the root of various opinions on representation in the “multiplication of ways of understanding experience.”¹⁸

It is evident that time and space were significant for many other artists. However, its representation was not challenging only for writers but for the photography and cinematography as well. Influence of the cinema on a modernistic writings and their technique was immense. In his work *Modernisté*, Martin Hilský points out that while discussing and analysing works such as *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*, it is impossible not to use some of the terminology connected primarily with cinematography such as “detail”, “cut”, and “montage”.¹⁹ The imitation of time was hence not dependent only on the philosophical theories and ideas of the century, but on the technical innovations and the new achievements, concepts and terminology invented in the technological sphere as well.

What is similar in all different representations of time is the fact that artists put an emphasis on the inner psychological time which is relative and hence represented as a continuous flow and not as an anatomized divided entity. Time in the novels of modernism can

¹⁷ Hilský 13.

¹⁸ Schleifer 138.

¹⁹ Hilský 23.

be stopped, expanded, stretched, or shortened. Peter Childs in *Modernism* also discusses the tendency of modernists to capture the real, actual understanding and observation of time: "Because individuals order reality differently from external time, fiction for the Modernists had to represent the individual's actual experience."²⁰ This kind of depiction is copying the psychological perception of time rather than the mechanical, anatomized clock-time of external life. D.H. Lawrence expressed this representation of time as a continuous flow and the importance of an actual imitation of our inner time in his *Apocalypse*: "We have to drop our manner of on-and-on-and-on, from a start to a finish, and allow the mind to move in cycles, or to flit here and there over a cluster of images. Our idea of time as a continuity in an eternal, straight line has crippled our consciousness cruelly."²¹ In other words, psychological flow of time was much more prized than the mechanical clock time, and this impulse can be observed in the modernists' literary works.

2.2. Virginia Woolf and Modernism

When discussing modernism in British literature, the personality and work of Virginia Woolf are often used as a prime example of the modernist writing technique. Virginia Woolf was born into the last decades of the Victorian era and she experienced all the changes brought by the new age. Her life spanned the death of Charles Darwin as well as the beginning of the Second World War.²² As has been already discussed, the changes that took place during this period were tremendous, affecting every fragment of the social and internal life of an individual. Virginia Woolf shared the struggles of her fellow writers concerning the representation of reality. The form and subject of Victorian novels had to inevitably adjust to the contemporary world and the perception and experience of the modern life. In her essay 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' Woolf writes: "Nobody indeed can read much modern literature without being

²⁰ Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000) 50.

²¹ D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (London: Macmillan, 1932) 97-98.

²² Jane Goldman, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 33.

aware that some dissatisfaction, some difficulty, is lying in our way. On all sides writers are attempting what they cannot achieve, are forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it.”²³ Former and conventional depictions of reality were no longer appropriate for the new era, which was in need for its own means of description. The experimentations of contemporary writers, including Woolf, lead to what Deborah Parsons describes as:

Formally radical, subjectively real and aesthetically autonomous, expressive of a world in which the present seems dislocated from the past, experience is fragmented, multiple and limitless, and previous certainties about the physical world and our selfhood within it have been swept away.²⁴

Virginia Woolf pondered upon the nature of the representation of ever-changing reality and the accurate illustration of all the impressions one experiences during an ordinary day. It is apparent that she was questioning the customs and old literary procedures while describing everyday life:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.²⁵

Woolf furthermore states her wish concerning the process of creation of contemporary works. She is once again stressing the importance of the depiction of life as a flowing entity and the impact of this flow on the perception of reality: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.”²⁶ From the selected quotations appearing in her essays, it is noticeable that one of her main objectives was the accurate representation of life. Some of the most important points about the precise

²³ Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 166.

²⁴ Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel* (London: Routledge, 2007) 3.

²⁵ Woolf, Essays 79.

²⁶ Woolf, Essays 79.

depiction of life and Woolf's understanding of the flow of time and the stream in one's mind are made in her collection of essays *Moments of Being*. It is this rather autobiographical work that deals with a very significant term: "moments of being." What was described in the Bergsonian philosophy as *durée* is similar to Woolf's notion of the moments of being:

During moments of being, this self is transcended and the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole. Thus, just as the outer limits of personality are blurred and unstable because of the responsiveness of the self to the forces of the present moment, so the boundaries of the inner self are vague and, at moments, non-existent.²⁷

This similarity will be discussed later, however, it is evident that Woolf juxtaposed the inner and external world as well. The flux of feelings and memories in the subjective realm is very different to the flow distinguished in the outer world. Focus on the external segments of life was not corresponding with the richness of internal experience, and the means that were used before were in the modern age inappropriate: new techniques and views on representation were required. In her *Theorists of the Modernist Novel*, Parson writes, while comparing the modernist novels to the novels of realism, that modernist novel: "still aims at the direct representation of human experience, it differs in its understanding of what constitutes that experience."²⁸ This thesis observes one of the possible interpretation of the essence of the experience represented by the techniques and juxtapositions used by Virginia Woolf.

2.2.1. Virginia Woolf: The Bloomsbury Group, Marcel Proust and Henri Bergson

Virginia Woolf was certainly a prominent novelist and an exceptional thinker. However, it must be noted that her intellectual development was not a solitary one; she was surrounded and influenced by some of the greatest thinkers of the century.

It is the Bloomsbury Group that can be easily described as a very influential unit in Woolf's life. The influence these people had on Woolf's literary journey is undeniable.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985) 18.

²⁸ Parsons 53.

Majumdar and McLaurin mention, for example, Roger Fry and Lytton Strachey “whose researches, respectively into biography and the visual arts, were paralleled by her experiments in fiction.”²⁹ Nevertheless, when it comes to the form of Woolf’s fiction, it is precisely Roger Fry whose character seems to be the most influential one. Roger Fry was an English painter, critic and a member of the Bloomsbury Group. Woolf’s diary suggests that she did not enjoy just Fry’s company and parties, but she valued and took seriously his opinions on her work as well. For example, after finishing *The Waves*, Virginia avoided meeting him because she suspected that he did not like *The Waves* at all.³⁰ It is thus clear that his critical opinion was for Woolf imperative. Julia Briggs points out that the concepts important for Roger Fry – precisely rhythm and time – became equally significant for Woolf as well: “From 1917, she began consciously to integrate these features into her own artistic practice and to think of form as an essential element in fiction – and one that might have a visual or spatial, even a ‘plastic’ dimension.”³¹ Briggs elaborates on the link between Fry’s concerns with those of Woolf by describing *To the Lighthouse* as “the novel that would engage most fully with Roger Fry’s painterly aesthetic and his concept of underlying form”³² Nevertheless, Fry’s conduct of the form is pictured also in the novel published four years later after *To the Lighthouse*: *The Waves*. Briggs links the structure composed of “volume, mass, depth and recession”³³ in *The Waves* with Fry’s “concept of underlying form due to which the novel can be described as possessing not only visual but also a spatial dimension.”³⁴

Nonetheless, it was not only the intellectuals of the Bloomsbury Group that had influenced Woolf’s work. In her diary, Virginia often mentions how strongly affected she was by the writing of Marcel Proust. His work seemed to her as “combination of the utmost

²⁹ Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin, eds., *Virginia Woolf* (London: Routledge, 1975) 1.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (San Diego: Harcourt, 1954) 173.

³¹ Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 100.

³² Briggs 102.

³³ Briggs 110.

³⁴ Briggs 110.

sensibility with the utmost tenacity.”³⁵ Harvena Richter notes the connection and possible influence that Proust’s concept of voluntary and involuntary memory had on Woolf’s work.³⁶ The voluntary memory is said to be released by visual and verbal associations while the involuntary memory is released by bodily senses. Similar triggers of memory are to be found, for example, in *Mrs Dalloway*.³⁷ It can be noticed that sounds are often used as a kind of stimuli which initiate the process of remembering. Principle example of this phenomenon would be Septimus: the sound of an airplane reminds him of war. Harvena Richter, for example, notices another parallel between Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and Woolf’s work in the novel *The Waves*: “Virginia Woolf’s treatment of personality as the sum of emotions felt by one person for another (as Percival is created from his friends’ feelings in *The Waves*) is parallel to that of Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*”³⁸ Such work with personality of a character is evident not only in *The Waves* but in *Mrs Dalloway* as well. Clarissa’s whole personality is based on tiny fragments from her life. These fragments are, in fact, often presented and retold by other characters, not Clarissa herself. This feature is not so prominent in *To the Lighthouse*, but it is possible to find its nuances in this work as well. Even after her death, Mrs Ramsay is still a significant and central character; her personality is based on the feelings other characters, especially Lily, have for her. Richter furthermore writes that Proust “may have suggested to her [Woolf] the discontinuity and free associations of near-sleeping states.”³⁹ Notwithstanding, while discussing this suggestion, she mentions another important personality whose direct influence on Proust is indisputable: Henri Bergson. Although there is no mention of Bergson in Woolf’s diary, Jane Harrison writes that Bergson was discussed and basically discovered “by every thinking man in Europe” in the pre-war period.⁴⁰ It can be deduced that the intellectuals

³⁵ Woolf, Diary 79.

³⁶ Harvena Richter, *The Inward Voyage* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970) 164.

³⁷ Richter 164.

³⁸ Richter 111.

³⁹ Richter 37.

⁴⁰ Jane Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student’s Life* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925) 81.

of the Bloomsbury Groups were no exception. However, Richter states that: "Woolf's moment of being, with its diversity in unity, resembles his concept of duration (*la durée*) in which time is qualitative, nonspatial, real, vertical and always present."⁴¹ The link between Woolf's notion of time and Bergson's philosophy is indirect, nevertheless, it is possible to claim that even if Woolf did not read the work of Bergson, it is very unlikely that she had not encountered the thoughts of one of the most prominent philosophers of the century.

2.2.2. Virginia Woolf: The Representation of Time

The impact on Woolf's understanding and work with the form and representation of life was already portrayed. Peter Childs also mentions Bergson's impact on the work of Virginia Woolf and adds that in *Mrs Dalloway*: "a few pages are frequently given to the discussion of thoughts dwelt upon by a character while only a few seconds of common clock-time elapse."⁴² This representation of time agrees with Bergson's view that psychological time can be measured only by the duration which does not necessarily have to correspond with the linear clock time. Woolf discussed her thoughts on time in her diary: on 23rd November 1926 she writes: "time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident—say the fall of a flower—might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist—nor time either."⁴³ It is evident that Woolf was aware of the idea that the past is both an inherent part of the present and of the future, and that the conducts of the past will have visible results in both of these periods.

Martin Hilský points out that Woolf's literary technique demonstrates what Henry Bergson and William James claimed: there is no moment in the present which would exist on its own with no dependence upon the past and the future.⁴⁴ However, the passage of time and

⁴¹ Richter 39.

⁴² Childs 49.

⁴³ Woolf, Diary 106.

⁴⁴ Hilský 25.

the perception of it is not presented only in *Mrs Dalloway* but also in her other important works. A journal entry analysing the embodiment of time discusses her novel *To the Lighthouse* and identifies a very similar representation of time to that of *Mrs Dalloway*: “Time is characterised both as a secluded part of cognitive structures and as a whole, containing fragments from the past, the present and the future.”⁴⁵ The article furthermore states that: “the linear structure of events happening is altered; they are presented as a whole, a mental space of time with no boundaries of past, present or future.”⁴⁶ It can be observed that Woolf’s play with time is generally analysed as very similar to Bergson’s approach to time and its passing. Woolf’s novels do not portray time as an entity which could be separated and does not overflow beside the imaginary border. In fact, one can find a contrary view on the subject: time is represented as an ever flowing entity which has an impact on the past and which carries parts of the future.

Martin Hilský compares the problem of capturing the passage of time in literature to the same problem that impressionistic painters faced. He adds that similarly as impressionistic painters removed line bordering shapes, Woolf removed the linear plot of the story in all her novels and short stories.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ulvydiene Loreta and Buivyte Giedre, “Embodiment of the Concept of Time in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.” *Respectus Philologicus* 23 (2013): 62, <66. 10.15388/RESPECTUS.2013.23.28.5>, 30 March 2020.

⁴⁶ Ulvydiene and Giedre 62.

⁴⁷ Hilský 153.

3. *Mrs Dalloway*

When studying multiple critical works on *Mrs Dalloway*, one can notice that this novel is often described in terms of its work with time. For example, in his *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur describes Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*, alongside two other works, as a tale about time and adds that: "fictional narrative detects temporalities that are more or less extended, offering in each instance a different figure of recollection, of eternity in or out of time."¹ The narration in this novel does not follow the proper chronology in which the amount of time in each time segment corresponds with the previous and following segment. It also does not treat the inner time as a device which helps the reader to grasp the chronology of the plot and the sequence of events in the story, but rather as a device which emphasizes the difference between the psychological and mechanical flow of time and their impact on the psyche of the characters.

The novel takes places in London during one day: it starts in the morning with the preparation for an upcoming party, and it is concluded by the party which occurs in the evening. A guiding device of the chronology in *Mrs Dalloway* is the Big Ben and other clocks, which function as reminders, both for the readers and for the characters of a particular hour of the day, and they are also representation of an external mechanical time. Alongside the sound of the clock, surroundings of the characters have also an important guiding function and work as reminders of the present moment for the characters. The psychological flow of time is emphasized by the stream of consciousness and by a technique that Woolf herself labelled as "tunnelling". She described this technique in her diary when she was writing *Mrs Dalloway*: "It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it."² One event in the novel brings back memory resulting in

¹ Ricoeur 101.

² Woolf, Diary 67.

a better understanding of the present. Gillies writes that: “The ‘tunneling process’ does not just provide background information; it knits together present actions and choices with the elements that led the character up to the moment of action.”³ The internal time in the minds of characters is not framed by any boundaries and it is thus freely moving from past to present and future, creating not separate, fragmented segments, but the sense of timelessness.

As has been noted, the novel starts in the morning with errands for a party. The external time is framed by activities that need to be performed, however, the associations based on these tasks remind Clarissa Dalloway of the past events:

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach... What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air.⁴

Despite time of the novel being set to the morning, the internal time of Clarissa moves freely into the past to her hometown Bourton. Between Clarissa saying “she would buy the flowers herself” and her interior remembrance of the past could have passed not more than a few seconds, however, Woolf already lets the mind of Clarissa wander many years back. This movement from present to the past is evident throughout the whole novel, and it suggests the difference between the external and internal time. In his *Dying for Time*, Martin Hägglund writes: “The memory of that day in Clarissa’s youth comes back throughout the entire novel, as she assesses the significance of her past experience and reckons with her delayed understanding of what happened.”⁵

When Clarissa ponders upon living in Westminster for over twenty years, it is apparent that her mind and the internal perception of time are not set at the present moment, but rather

³ Gillies 115.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Mariner Books, 1990) 2. All future references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

⁵ Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) 63.

that they move, recollect and combine the past and present together so that the segments of divided time are no longer observable:

For having lived in Westminster—how many years now? over twenty, -- one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. (2)

Clarissa Dalloway's past is not separated from the present: it has still an essential and vital place in her life. The extent to which this significance affects Clarissa's life can be observed from the connection that Clarissa makes between the way she perceives the rush of London, and the fact that it has been like that for more than twenty years. Critic Julian Pattison claims that the past in *Mrs Dalloway* is as alive as the present for the majority of the characters, including Mrs Dalloway herself.⁶ While running errands for the party, Clarissa meets one of her old friends Hugh, and this meeting evokes numerous memories and feelings from her past. Hugh and Clarissa are talking, they are physically in London, it is about nine o'clock, and Clarissa's mind moves to Bourton: "She could remember scene after scene at Bourton, Peter furious; Hugh not, of course, his match in any way, but still not a positive imbecile as Peter made out; not a mere barber's block." (4)

By the method of tunnelling, the relationships that are somehow still significant for Clarissa's life are introduced. The way in which the morning is narrated and the whole day progresses shows that the past is actively participating in the formation of the present. The past and present are forming a coherent whole and it is almost impossible to divide one from the other. The meeting with Hugh sheds light on Clarissa's life. The past is a shaping device of her character and her perception of the world. It is not forgotten nor regressed, but rather acknowledged as an important element.

⁶ Julian Pattison, *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (London: Macmillan, 1987) 60.

Another essential fragment of Clarissa's life is represented by her old love Peter Walsh. Coming back from India, Peter visits Clarissa and the next part of Clarissa's life is revealed: "And it was awfully strange, he thought, how she still had the power, as she came tinkling, rustling, still had the power as she came across the room, to make the moon, which he detested, rise at Bourton on the terrace in the summer sky" (35). Peter's mind flows to the past to Bourton due to the associations that he has of Clarissa and that place. During this short visit, Clarissa is also thinking about their past and about what life could have been had she married him. However, at this point, Woolf draws a dramatic line between the present – during which Clarissa is married to another man and Peter is in love with an Indian woman – and between the past. The clock of the Big Ben can be heard and its sound makes both Peter and Clarissa aware of the present moment in which they are no longer together: "The sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour struck out between them with extraordinary vigour, as if a young man, strong, indifferent, inconsiderate, were swinging dumb-bells this way and that." (35) Big Ben, representing the external mechanical time, is described as "indifferent" and "inconsiderate". This suggests that the outer time flows without mercy and the past can be alive only in one's mind and hence only in the psychological perception of time. It is thus evident that the novel does not portray only the inner flow of time, but that the outer time of the external world shared by everyone is an important subject in the novel as well. Big Ben is presented almost as a character. Woolf compares this symbol of London to a young man. This parallel even enhances the role of the Big Ben. However, what is more important than its personification is what this clock represents: a powerful and indifferent flux.

The outer flow of time and its nature are juxtaposed with the present moment that is constantly emphasized throughout the novel. The present moment has a unique and a very personal place in the day of the characters. In his *Time and Free Will*, Bergson writes:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live... For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed

in the passing sensation or idea... Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the past and the present into an organic whole...⁷

This Bergsonian approach can be found in *Mrs Dalloway*. It is reflected mainly in Mrs Dalloway, whose internal perception of time is not divided into past, present, and future. For example, Gillies describes the pure duration as the “moments when we leave l’étendu and enter into an intuitive relationship with the essence of ourselves or those things that spark the moment.”⁸ Clarissa Dalloway has a very intuitive relationship with everything around her. She is aware of the present moment, but the present moment is described as composed not only of everything that is, but of everything that has been and will be: “in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.” (4) One can feel a sense of joy from such depiction of life. However, Hägglund perceives Clarissa’s enthusiasm for the present moment as another representation of the indifferent flow of time.⁹ It seems that every moment is nothing less than exciting and extraordinary. This can be partly based on Clarissa’s strong sense of intuition and belonging, nevertheless, it is possible that she is aware of the preciousness of the present because she is aware of its temporality. It is only when one feels time running up that he can really appreciate it. As mentioned before, Clarissa has recovered from a serious disease and that is probably the main reason why she is capable of enjoying even the simplest walk in the streets of London in a very exciting manner.

Similar tendency can be observed also in Clarissa’s notion of the future. Running errands for the party is a representation of the imminent future event which is bound to follow. However, Clarissa’s thoughts are wandering even further: she thinks about death. As hinted before, she might think about death because it seems too real to her, after having recovered

⁷ Bergson 100.

⁸ Gillies 109.

⁹ Hägglund 64.

from a serious disease. Nonetheless, with the ability to enjoy every moment comes also an acceptance of death. Death is omnipresent in everything she sees and her dying does not mean that her character completely ceases to exist:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? But that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived (5)

Clarissa's view on death will be discussed later on in the chapter with her connection to Septimus, nevertheless, it can be observed even now that she tries to come to terms with death. This can be described in terms of what Bergson depicts as "forming both the past and the present into an organic whole"¹⁰. Clarissa is grasping the fact that death does not have to be the final "part" for it does not have to be "part" at all. It seems that Woolf suggests that such division is not possible: the past, present, and future all collide, each carries other parts within itself.

Clarissa's inner stream of consciousness does not consist only of memories and random associations, but also of the recognition of the environment that she found herself in. For example, when she is thinking about her old love Peter, she remembers how he called her prude and how it made her angry, but this train of thought is interrupted by her reaching the Park gates: "It made her angry still... She had reached the Park gates. She stood for a moment, looking at the omnibuses in Piccadilly." (5) Her moving from one place to another is used as a framing device which helps with the orientation within the story. The present is, as has been hinted, emphasized by the surroundings of her morning walk, and this pattern is repeated throughout the whole morning.

The surroundings, nevertheless, do not function only as a reminding device for Clarissa. They are also employed as a bridge between various minds of the characters. The surroundings and events are shared by all the people on the street: for example, when an aeroplane appears

¹⁰ Bergson 100.

on the sky, writing letters as a form of advertisement, the narration shifts from Clarissa to Septimus Warren Smith. Such shift thus allows readers to experience not only thoughts and associations of the particular character, but also their own perception of time and its flow. Ricoeur emphasizes the stream of consciousness in this novel, suggesting that: “the stream of consciousness serves as the basis for the experience that its characters have of time.”¹¹ It is evident that each character perceives the internal time in a different way. This suggests that the perception of psychological time is not shared by every individual, and Woolf contrasts this notion with the perception of external time, which is symbolized by events that take place in the streets of London, and clocks whose sound is heard by all its citizens. Perception of the mechanical time is shared. As has been pointed out, when an aeroplane flies over the city, everybody sees it, however, this event evokes different associations in different characters. It is thus apparent that even though the external time is shared, every character has his own connotations with the events surrounding this outer flow. This can be interpreted as a Bergsonian notion accenting “that there is a fundamental difference between the physical cause of a sensation and the way it feels to us.”¹² For example, Mrs Dempster sees the aeroplane and immediately thinks of her wish to travel: “Ah, but that aeroplane! Hadn’t Mrs. Dempster always longed to see foreign parts? She had a nephew, a missionary. It soared and shot.” (20) The aeroplane starts the process of association in Septimus’ mind as well. We learn that he used to be a soldier and that his trauma from war has had a tremendous impact on his life. In other words, the past has influenced his present to the extent that his mind does not properly distinguish internal and external time. Septimus’ associations and the mere reaction to the plane are very abstract; his mind flows from one obscure idea to another. His present perception is influenced deeply by the past without differentiation between what is real and what not: “There

¹¹ Ricoeur 102.

¹² Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: an Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006) 45.

was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!!” (18) Septimus lives in the present, but he sees people that are no longer alive: the dead from the war and the officer Evans. This suggests that even though the war is over, his perception of the present and past is so perplexed that he is not aware of his mind wandering to the past and making him see people as if they were actually present at the given moment. His wife, Rezia, acknowledges his condition and she is described as his link with the present moment by repeatedly imploring him to be aware of his surroundings:

“Look,” she implored him, pointing at a little troop of boys carrying cricket stumps, and one shuffled, spun round on his heel and shuffled, as if he were acting a clown at the music hall.

“Look,” she implored him, for Dr. Holmes had told her to make him notice real things (18)

Rezia making him notice “real things” emphasizes the difference between external and internal perception of time and the imminent surroundings. Septimus does not notice “real things” because his perception of the present is not independent of his past. The past is even more alive than the present, and there is no division between the two: they have merged. Memories of Evans are not comprehended as memories by Septimus but as reality. Dramatic event as war can have a significant impact on one’s life and in the case of Septimus, the outcome can be described as the failure to exist in the present. Gillies points out that: “memory unassimilated with present life is seen as the source of madness”¹³ and adds: “It is imperative, then, to have a memory faculty that is capable not only of storing experiences but also of relating them to current life.”¹⁴ Septimus represents a character who was not capable of relating his memories to the present. It is possibly not correct to claim that the past has caused his death. Nonetheless, it is evident that the past had changed him and the experiences that he had were so severe that he could no longer exist without them. The memories of the war, all the dead people, and Evans

¹³ Gillies 120.

¹⁴ Gillies 120.

became part of him and he was not able to separate them from the current state his life was in. After his death, Rezia hears the sound of the clock which she perceives as “sensible” compared with “all this thumping and whispering: like Septimus himself [...] The clock went on striking, four, five, six [...] Of her memories, most were happy” (115). The notion that most of her memories were happy emphasizes the reason Septimus decided to kill himself: his memories were not happy and, in fact, they were not memories in a common meaning of the word. As mentioned before, they became an inseparable part of him. Even though he was no longer at war, his mind still was, and such a profound difference between mental and physical state cannot function together. After her husband killed himself, Rezia still notices the clock. It is evident that the external time of the world did not stop. The mechanical clock and the time of the outer world are not influenced by the death of a young man. This suggests the indifferent nature of time and this notion is also suggested by Clarissa when thinking about the suicide:

The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. [...] She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. (144)

Clarissa sees that the time did not stop. It flows on and she identifies herself with Septimus. As has been pointed out earlier in the chapter, Clarissa sees death as just another part of life. Even if she had felt fear of death, with this young man killing himself, it has all disappeared for “the clock was striking” the life was still moving on.

It is significant to state that the character of Septimus Smith is not important just to portray the difference between the common processing of memory, which can be noticed, for example, in Peter Walsh, or Clarissa, and between the inability to incorporate memories into the present life. He also functions as a parallel to Clarissa. He is the representation of some of her features that she is probably not very keen on admitting. Nevertheless, the recognition of these is a key to the insight into who she really is. Even though Septimus is not directly a part

of her past nor present, he is still significant. Gillies points out that Clarissa possesses the Bergsonian notion of intuition, which allows a person to recognize the unique in another.¹⁵ This capability enables Clarissa to learn from others and acquire even more understanding of herself. Her own past and her own memories do not present the only way to self-illumination: she can learn about herself by experiencing what others feel. When William Bradshaw discusses the suicide of a young man at her party, Clarissa acknowledges her fear of living and the fear of dying:

Then (she had felt it only this morning) there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one's parents giving it into one's hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear. (142)

It would be rather radical to assume that Clarissa Dalloway was not afraid of dying before the suicide of the young man, however, the novel points out that Septimus' death did not only shock Clarissa. The suicide started a process of pondering upon what it means to be alive. Clarissa accepts the fear, but on the other hand, she is now aware of the fact that she is possibly stronger than the young man. She is the one who is alive and can, in fact, come back to life wiser. However, this personal growth must have been preceded by the realization of her own mortality. Septimus' character being parallel to Clarissa allows not only readers to learn something about the main character; it enables Clarissa to shed light on some of her hidden fears. Just before the story moves back from Clarissa's inner stream of consciousness to the party, Clarissa thinks: "He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room." (143) Clarissa as if comes back to life; she is almost reincarnated and it is probably at this point that the meaning of the party is revealed; the party is a celebration of the possibility to be still alive, to still have fun, to be able to come back from "the little room". Deborah Parsons describes this

¹⁵ Gillies 116.

method as a technique in which: “a figure is illuminated by the external perceptions of others as much as their own internal consciousness”¹⁶

As has been already noted, personal memory and one’s associations play a fundamental role in the creation of a subjective reality. However, intimate recollections of the past are not the only partakers on the shaping of one’s reality. Collective cultural memory is also an essential fragment in the understanding of the world. Woolf mentions the Great War multiple times in her *Mrs Dalloway*. Septimus’ experience of the war is not the only one there is: his experience had a tremendous impact on his life, but the war influenced the whole population, even if it happened unconsciously. When a car with an important person, representing the British Empire, passes Bond Street, Clarissa thinks:

Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. [...] For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound. (13)

Clarissa can feel the change in the environment after the war. By seeing the car pass, all the onlookers are thinking about the war, about the dead and possibly about what the future will bring. This is a representation of not personal, but collective memory: it touches all the people that experienced the war, not just an individual. Even this kind of memory and perception of the world is moulding a person in who he is to become. Woolf points out the crucial role history of the whole generation plays in one’s own individual life.

In a chapter called “Where Memory Touches History”, Gabriele McIntire writes: “While Woolf argues for a fundamental indestructibility of the past, she also feared the powers and the contagion of cultural amnesia.”¹⁷ The notion of feared cultural amnesia can be noticed in *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, when Richard Dalloway walks through the streets of London

¹⁶ Parsons 76.

¹⁷ Gabriele McIntire, *Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 180.

and thinks: “Really it was a miracle thinking of the war, and thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shovelled together, already half forgotten; it was a miracle.” (18) The war and its consequences seem to be almost forgotten. It is very hard for Richard to think of the war when it is over and when he is walking during a beautiful day, preparing to say Clarissa that he loves her. Nonetheless, there are people such as Septimus who cannot forget the war. The scene with the aeroplane has been already discussed in the context of providing a tool, as the rest of the shared surroundings, to shift from one stream of consciousness to another. However, this scene follows the event with the car portraying the connection between the war and future: it is evident that Woolf points out the significance of the past on British future. Clarissa can feel something “very profound” and this can be the social awareness of coming into the new period of their lives which is accompanied by an understandable uncertainty. People in the streets of London are captivated by the commercial in the air because they are trying to decode its meaning. Nevertheless, one should think not about the particular letters in the sky, but about the context in which they are being written. The war is over and the war aeroplanes in the sky are replaced by commercial ones. By using this scene after the car incident, Woolf emphasizes the impact the war can possibly have on the whole collective memory of British citizens and their traditions that can be, as a consequence of the war, changed and alternated by something completely different and new. The motor car does not represent a lasting picture, it disappears, and when it passes the gates of the palace, the people are already captivated by the aeroplane representing modernity: “It’s toffee,” murmured Mr. Bowley (and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it)” (15) It is important to notice that the disappearance of the car is mentioned only in parentheses. The tradition and representation of the British Empire could be no longer presented as stable. Its importance slowly lingers without anyone really noticing.

It is evident that Woolf did not only juxtapose the inner and external flow of time and its perception. This Bergsonian dichotomy is apparent in the novel, nonetheless, the subject of *Mrs Dalloway* is also something beyond the subjective perception: Woolf pondered upon the shared past and memories that shape the perception of the whole generation, and not just an individual, as well.

4. To the Lighthouse

Published in 1927, *To the Lighthouse* is the fifth novel written by Virginia Woolf. Like in the case of *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*, a brief description of the novel is not possible. *To the Lighthouse* ponders upon various themes ranging from childhood to death, however, it is its style which makes it an incredibly complex novel. The description made by Woolf's husband, Leonard Woolf, is rather succinct, but it still manages to capture the essence of the novel. In her diary, Woolf writes that after finishing the novel, Leonard labelled it as a "psychological poem"¹ while Woolf herself characterized this work as an "elegy"². *To the Lighthouse* can be unquestionably defined as both a psychological and an elegiac work, because, as her diary suggests, Woolf was writing this novel to free herself from the constant presence of her parents in her mind, resulting in success.³ Childhood and parenthood are very significant themes in the novel, nonetheless, they are not used as a framing device of the novel that helps with the orientation within the story, as for example development from childhood to adulthood in *The Waves*. It is a constant movement to a particular point in the novel which has taken the role of the navigating mechanism in this work. From the first pages of "The Window" through the last part of "The Lighthouse", a journey directed to the lighthouse is discussed. The lighthouse is a stable, unyielding aim that is constant throughout the novel, while being juxtaposed by the ever changing sea, emotions, opinions, and impressions. The first and the last chapter of the work have been already mentioned, but the novel is composed of three chapters, and the middle one is called "Time Passes." If the other two can be described as depicting themes of childhood, adulthood and death, "Time Passes" is a precise portrait of what its name refers to: a passage of time. Nevertheless, the notion of flow of time is present in the whole novel, and it is stretched and contracted according to the subjective perception. For example, a few days, when a whole

¹ Woolf, Diary 107.

² Woolf, Diary 85.

³ Woolf, Diary 139.

family and a group of friends are staying together in a summer house, are described on more pages and more meticulously than ten years in the second chapter, which are subject to only a few pages. Gillies writes that this dichotomy is a representation of the Bergsonian concepts of *dureé* and *l'étendu*: ‘Recalling Bergson's assertion that both *dureé* and *l'étendu* are necessary for an integrated life allows for an even better appreciation of how Bergsonian this novel is; by balancing the middle section with the two that surround it, Woolf implicitly represents Bergson's ideal situation.’⁴

As the Big Ben in *Mrs Dalloway*, the lighthouse is also used as a representation of a stable aspect of the external world. It can be claimed that it is the only thing which does not change and does not surrender to the pressure of time throughout the novel. The first connection that the novel makes with the lighthouse, besides the title, is James' recurrent wish to go there. When Mrs. Ramsay, his mother, says that they shall go tomorrow, James feels “extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place”⁵ Reaching the lighthouse is much more important for James than the actual journey. However, Mr. Ramsay does not allow them going to the lighthouse, and this initiates the process of love/hate feelings in his wife and his children. The journey to the lighthouse is being constantly postponed, until ten years later, when Mrs. Ramsay is no longer alive, and James and his sister Camille are not children anymore. If we were to compare the importance of the journey to the lighthouse in the first and the last chapter, we would have found out that the emotions connected with it changed drastically. As has been pointed out, Mr. Ramsay is against the cruise and James' reaction is as follows:

Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children's breasts (8)

⁴ Gillies 121.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Ed. Stella McNichol (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 7. All future references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

Notwithstanding, in the last part of the novel, James and Cam hate the idea of undergoing the sail to the lighthouse. They hope that the wind would not blow so that they could not move, and the whole journey would be cancelled. They know that their father wants to sail to the lighthouse “for his own pleasure in memory of dead people” (180). Nevertheless, the journey suddenly becomes a myriad of what Woolf referred to as “moments of being” and what can be described as the representation of the Bergsonian notion of *dureé*. James and Cam’s consciousness is free of the external world and time imposed on them:

Cam looked down into the foam, into the sea with all its treasure in it, and its speed hypnotized her, and the tie between her and James sagged a little. [...] She began to think, How fast it goes. Where are we going? And the movement hypnotized her, while James, with his eye fixed on the sail and on the horizon steered grimly. But he began to think as he steered that he might escape; he might be quit of it all. They might land somewhere; And be free then. Both of them had a sense of escape and exaltation, what with the speed and change. (180)

The whole impression of escape is even emphasized when their father points out their house on the shore, but Cam sees the shore as “refined, far away, unreal” (180). Both Cam and James are as if distancing themselves from everything else, but the present moment. The present has engulfed them and they were no longer part of anything superficial. This is a precise representation of the unordinary moments of being, when one deeply enjoys his own connection to some higher entity. In the introduction of Woolf’s *Moments of Being*, Jeane Schulkind writes: “for the moment of being is most often a ‘sledge-hammer blow’, a shock; the meaning unfolds after the experience.”⁶ It is the experience that is emphasized in this scene. What was important for James ten years before is no longer significant. The journey to the lighthouse can be easily described as a spiritual one, rather than a journey with a specific building as a destination. However, portrayal of the moments of being is not the only thing pursued by characters during the sail. Woolf used this scene also as an example of reconciliation with the past. When Mr. Ramsay declined James’ idea to visit the lighthouse ten years ago, it sparked a feeling of hatred

⁶ Woolf, *Moments* 21.

towards his own father. It can be deduced that a small child as James was, besides the adventure, looking for the approval of his father as well. By almost reaching the lighthouse, Mr. Macalister, who is also in the boat, praises James for keeping the course of the boat steady. James bitterly thinks that his father never praises him and it is evident that James holds a grudge for the conduct of his father: his desire to feel the approval of his father is very strong, but so far he has not experienced it. Nonetheless, when they finally get to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay praises James' ability to steer the boat and Cam thinks:

You've got it at last. For she knew that this was what James had been wanting, and she knew that now he had got it he was so pleased that he would not look at her or at his father or at any one. There he sat with his hand on the tiller sitting bolt upright, looking rather sulky and frowning slightly. He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody take away a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. (223)

It is important to note that not only James comes to terms with the past but Mr. Ramsay does as well. His strong desire to finally sail to the lighthouse can be easily interpreted as his way of forgiving himself for not going when his wife was still alive. Like Cam and James, Mr. Ramsay is also experiencing a powerful feeling of being one with something higher than him. With them being on the sea, he is distanced from the shore and from his former life. However, he still sees himself there, on the shore, walking the usual roads. But suddenly, he is overwhelmed with a feeling that there is some unifying force, something much deeper than himself, and he quotes aloud two lines from William Cowper's poem "The Castaway"

But I beneath a rougher sea
Was whelmed in deeper gulfs than he (181)

Even though Mr. Ramsay has a very pessimistic view on life, these two lines can be still understood as a way of merging with the world around, and at the same time as a way of accepting the fact that his philosophy, opinions and authority will eventually "perish": this is a representation of his own moments of "pure duration" or in other words *dureé*. Furthermore, it is this pessimism that finally brings Cam and her father closer. While listening to the sound

of waves, she thinks: “We perish, each alone, for her father’s words broke and broke again in her mind...” (182) In his essay, Roger Lund also points out the connection that Cam and her father from this point on share: “Indeed, as if by a kind of spiritual alchemy, Cam discovers herself sharing her father’s dream, and in some measure her reconciliation with her father arises from her acceptance of his tragic view of life. Without wishing to.”⁷

Another journey to reconciliation that takes place in the novel is reflected in Lily’s painting. Lily Briscoe is a family friend of the Ramsays, and she stays with them in the summer house. Mrs. Ramsay admires her independence, however, another admirable feature when it comes to Bergson and his philosophy is intuition. Intuition was, for example, portrayed and discussed by Clarissa Dalloway: she was able to feel how others feel and to break down the wall that distanced her from the others. Lily’s intuition is displayed in the way she works when she paints. Her aim is to capture the essence of what she sees, rather than creating a mere copy of her surroundings:

She could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that. She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral (54)

The first chapter of the novel captures her struggle and anxiety when it comes to her painting. She is very self-conscious when somebody looks over her shoulder. Nevertheless, as Cam, James and Mr. Ramsay finally find their reconciliation with their past once they reach the lighthouse, Lily also accepts her painting and her vision of her surroundings once the painting is done. Woolf used the notion of the moments of being even in the case of Lily. When she paints she feels as if she “was losing consciousness of outer things, and as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance” (174) All the external things that penetrate into one’s innermost feelings and impressions of oneself disappear when

⁷ Roger D. Lund, “We Perished Each Alone: ‘The Castaway’ and ‘To the Lighthouse.’” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 16.1 (1989): 89, JSTOR www.jstor.org/stable/3831375, 20 April 2020.

she paints. The painting is used symbolically, like the journey to the lighthouse. It suggests that not the actual journey, but the aim is more important and the aim of both the sail and the painting is absolute unification with oneself, without letting the external world take its toll. Lily is giving up the impressions other have of her – she is for example referring to her outer image, which is commented on by Mrs. Ramsay at the beginning of the novel. She thinks that Lily will never marry because of her looks. Nonetheless, this outer, external impression has nothing in common with Lily's true essence. It can be said that Lily is the embodiment of the Bergsonian notion of intuition and *dureé*.

Lily's character is often occupied with the thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay. In fact, all the characters are aware of her distinguishable presence when she is around. It is evident that Mrs. Ramsay functions as a central and unifying character. She has an influence on other's people lives, even if it happens unconsciously. At multiple occasions, Woolf portrayed her as being very considerate and thinking of others. For example, when she is going to town with Charles Tansley, she stops by an old man, Mr. Carmichael, and suggests buying him some of the things he enjoys: "Stamps, writing, paper, tobacco?" (14) Mr. Carmichael does not want anything, but even though he declined her offer, he still enhances her wish to please and connect with those around her by describing her aura as: "vast and benevolent lethargy of well-wishing; all the house; all the world; all the people in it" (14) This feature of hers is a central motif of the whole chapter represented by the dinner, which is one of the main events in the story. Mrs. Ramsay emphasizes time and its duration during the serving of the dinner. She enhances the fact that the Boeuf en Dauble was prepared and cooked for three days and must be served with a precise timing. However, what is more significant is the description of her anxiety when she does not feel the connection around the dinner table that she expected to feel. Her thoughts are moving from the inner world to the external world in which she serves the soup:

Raising her eyebrows at the discrepancy - that was what she was thinking, this was what she was doing - ladling out soup she felt, more and more strongly,

outside that eddy; or as if a shade had fallen, and, robbed of colour, she saw things truly. The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. She forebore to look at Mr. Tansley. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking - one, two, three, one, two three. (91)

She seems to share the strong intuition that Lily possesses: Mrs. Ramsay is engulfed in the essence of thinks and it is clear that she is aware of the role that the external world has imposed on her. Woolf states this by using the watch as a symbol for heartbeat of Mrs. Ramsay, functioning as a host during her dinner gathering. After a few rather unpleasant moments with no meaningful conversation, the atmosphere shifts. This change is caused by lighting of the candles, which bring all the characters finally together. By this shift, the aim of Mrs. Ramsay is fulfilled: she managed to host a dinner at which all the people were unified and the external world imposed on them had no significance:

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. [...] solidity suddenly vanished, and such vast spaces lay between them; and now the same effect was got by the many candles in the sparely furnished room [...] Some weight was taken off them (106)

This connection makes every character feel a bit lighter, as if the “weight was taken off them”, the weight can be easily interpreted as their roles in life and their sometimes very bitter opinions of one another. They managed to meet the essence of things and by this, conquer the *l'étendu*. However, Mrs. Ramsay is not just concerned with the unification, but she is also aware of the past and how it influences the present moment. When it comes to her understanding of this notion, she can be quite easily compared with Clarissa Dalloway. They both acknowledge the past as a forming device in the future. This belief is enhanced by the scene in which Mrs.

Ramsay thinks about James remembering the day during which their father did not want to take them to the lighthouse:

In a moment he would ask her, "Are we going to the Lighthouse?" And she would have to say, "No: not to-morrow; your father says not." Happily, Mildred came in to fetch them, and the bustle distracted them. But he kept looking back over his shoulder as Mildred carried him out, and she was certain that he was thinking, we are not going to the Lighthouse to-morrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life. (68)

Mrs. Ramsay knows how the past disappointment can affect the future. She feels that this one specific moment will stay with James for the rest of his life. This too can be understood as the representation of the unordinary moments that are meaningful even a few years later. However, when the children are finally in bed, and Mrs. Ramsay has a moment for herself, she again frees herself from her role of a mother, like her role of a host during the dinner, and she feels the strong unity with the essence of the world:

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of - to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedgeshaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. [...] Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless. (69)

Once she sheds herself of her duty as a mother, she becomes one with everything. It is evident that she is capable of feeling this profound integrity. Her mind moves from one place to another, but it does not create a chaotic image. It is a portrayal of the unity not touched by the external world and its roles. Gillies sees this wandering of a mind as Woolf's attempt to "create the impression of life's chaos bounded by the restraints imposed on it by the rational mind."⁸ Like Lily, James, Cam and Mr. Ramsay, even Mrs. Ramsay is capable of acknowledging and feeling

⁸ Gillies 120.

the moments of being. The external time and roles imposed on her do not have any significance in the given moment, the past, present, and future are not divided, her mind is present in a space where such divisions do not exist.

As has been noted, Mrs. Ramsay is a central character. She brings other protagonists together, which is evident during her dinner party. It can be said that she functions in a similar way as Percival in *The Waves*. Nevertheless, even though her importance in the lives of others is emphasized in both the first, and the last part of the novel, her death is announced in the middle part “Time Passes” in parenthesis:

The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly helter skelter until the lawn is plastered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain pipes and scatter damp paths. [...] [Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.] (140)

It is not only the death of Mrs. Ramsay which is announced in the parenthesis, but also of her daughter Prue and their friend Andrew. These three serious events are engulfed in descriptions of the house, the sea, and the waves. It is enhancing the indifferent nature of the external time and world imposed on all the characters. The time does not stop just because someone dies. This characteristic of time was used even in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*. The middle part of *To the Lighthouse* is concerned only with the passage of time and the effect it has. Gillies points out that this part of the novel is probably the most Bergsonian in a sense that “much happens yet little is seen by the reader.”⁹ It is a representation of the flow of life which happens “beneath the events of daily life.”¹⁰ Death of Mrs. Ramsay and her daughter are “just” these two small insignificant events, however, the time flows in an uncompromising way. The whole chapter is a representation of the “adding day to day.” It is focused on the cycle of the changing of seasons, days and nights and many other natural processes. Were the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, her

⁹ Gillies 120.

¹⁰ Gillies 121.

daughter and Andrew described in the first or second chapter, they would have been given more space. It is human mind that makes such events important: in their essence, they do not have the power to interfere with the passage of time.

5. *The Waves*

Another novel which displays Woolf's experimental and inventive style, when it comes to the portrayal of the perception of time, is *The Waves*. This novel is often described as being very close to poetry; however, it is also defined as a Bergsonian work.¹ The combination of both results in the notions of *durée* and *l'étendu* being interlaced with poetic metaphors of waves and light, creating a lucid image of timelessness. Even though it follows a rough chronology from childhood to death, the narration of *The Waves* is far from being conventional. Narrative technique is composed of soliloquies spoken by six characters of the novel, displaying the individual consciousness and its relation to a central consciousness shared by every protagonist. Woolf wrote in her diary that she wanted these soliloquies to be "running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves."² The inner thoughts and associations resemble the flow of life, while the waves and light can be described as a representation of the eternity. The scenes on the sea are depicted by a third person narration portraying different stages of the day, from sunrise to sunset, mimicking the progress of life from the beginning to the end. Woolf described her ambition when writing *The Waves* in her diary:

The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional.³

She wanted to avoid clear, traditional and "unreal" narration by creating a story in which only the important moments of being are pictured and given emphasis, while still being framed by the movement of the sun.

The novel begins with sun still not visible on the horizon. The early morning darkness creates a unifying picture of the sea and the sky: they are indistinguishable. This unity is,

¹ Gillies 126.

² Woolf, Diary 157.

³ Woolf, Diary 140.

however, soon broken by the light: “Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.”⁴ Sunrise and waves are for generations the same; nevertheless, the sun and its light navigate an individual throughout the day. The sun in this novel can be seen as clock in *Mrs Dalloway*; it works as a framing device representing the external image of time. As has been already mentioned, the position of the sun not only indicates time of the day, it is also used as a mimesis of the natural progression of life. The characters are introduced, similarly as the day, at a very early stage of their lives, and the nature of each one of them is slowly revealed by their inner thoughts and perceptions of the present moment. The poetic portraits of the position of the sun and light move as the novel progresses. These descriptions are not static and just reflecting the nature; they are also functioning as mirrors to the lives of the characters.

Woolf did not use only the ocean and the movement of the sun as a natural imagery in this novel. Each interlude contains, besides other phenomena, also an image of the behaviour of birds. What is emphasized in these interludes is predominantly their singing and the melody of their voice. The singing of the birds changes throughout the interludes – their behaviour foreshadows the behaviour of the characters in the story. Julia Briggs points out that by using natural imagery in these interludes, as well as the image of the waves in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf managed to merge “the human unconscious and the natural world.”⁵ Nevertheless, it is not only the unity of the human mind and the natural world that was achieved. One can interpret the correspondence of interludes with the plot and emotions of the characters as a means to combine and merge the external with the internal. The interludes represent the outer reality and time which does not surrender to the human condition. The birds are used as a bridge between

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 61. All future references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

⁵ Briggs 108.

this realm and between that of protagonists. This connection makes all the connections in the story even stronger by enhancing their similarity with nature.

Woolf employed numerous small motifs and details inherited from nature when it comes to the portrayal of the passage of time. One of these is, for example, the image of a drop. The metaphor of a drop is connected with time and mostly with Bernard. He is the one for whom is the image of a drop the most significant. The movement of a drop and the formation of its liquid state is compared with the flow of time: “This drop falling has nothing to do with losing my youth. This drop falling is time tapering to a point. [...] As a drop falls from a glass heavy with some sediment, time falls.” (158) The significance of the drop and other natural metaphors play an important role in the overall treatment of time, and it is precisely these details that make the novel an extremely complex and meticulous study of the flow of time and its impact on one’s mind.

As has been mentioned before, these natural devices have also another function: the cyclic motions of sun and the waves also work as framing devices of the story. The chapters in themselves do not majorly focus on a linear, common notion of time, and thus is the use of the natural clock helpful in navigating the plot. The importance of this framing device is enhanced by the fact that there is no single narrator that would help the readers to orientate within the story. Woolf decided to use six different narrators, and it is only when their narration is combined that everything falls together. The protagonists usually refer to something else in a given moment and this allows the readers to form a coherent picture from the provided pieces. Furthermore, by the use of six different narrative voices, each quite distinguishable from the others, Woolf displays Bergonian notion that reality is highly subjective and it is created by individual’s own perception of the world.⁶ What is really essential is the fact that the various impressions of the character can be combined into one single picture, representing the unified

⁶ Gillies 129.

present moment. The plot of the story begins in the morning before the school lessons take place by the children describing what they see:

‘I SEE a ring,’ said Bernard, ‘hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.’

‘I see a slab of pale yellow,’ said Susan, ‘spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.’

‘I hear a sound,’ said Rhoda, ‘cheep, chirp: cheep, chirp: going up and down.’

‘I see a globe,’ said Neville, ‘hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.’

‘I see a crimson tassel,’ said Jinny, ‘twisted with gold threads.’

‘I hear something stamping,’ said Louis. ‘A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.’ (64)

Every description of the present circumstances is different, but all the points made are valid. In her chapter on *The Waves*, Gillies writes that Woolf chose: “to insist that real living occurred in extraordinary moments of being in which time was conflated and all moments existed simultaneously.”⁷ The moments are fused together even if they are happening a few seconds apart. The simultaneous portrayal of the same event is a technique commonly used in the novel. For example, Jinny having kissed Louis is referred to by each child in a slightly different way. However, together they form an extraordinary present moment which is felt individually and at the same time shared by everyone. Such commonly shared memories that are experienced by the whole group are pointed out even later on in the novel. These recollections enhance the importance each distinct memory has for their own individual reality separated from the external life. A character who functions as a unifier and emphasises the importance of others in one’s own life is Percival. Percival can be described as a central character of the novel, even though he does not have his own narrative voice as the rest of the characters. Similarly as in *Mrs Dalloway*, readers can comprehend his life and personality not from his own recollections of his past, but from the recollections of his six friends. The unity among the protagonists is emphasized by Bernard’s thoughts after Percival had left for India: “There is a red carnation in

⁷ Gillies 130.

that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution.” (192)

It is evident that all of them do participate in the creation of one shared consciousness. While the characters are going on about their everyday duties, they are still conscious of Percival. This creates a sense of timelessness, as if everything that various characters encounter is finally unified, and it is from these unifications that their reality is moulded. From the fragments of “the moments of being” of other characters, we learn a lot about Percival: “Look now, how everybody follows Percival. He is heavy. He walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand. His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him.” (71) It is almost as if the perception of the world was described through the eyes of Percival, and not some other character. Based on various associations the protagonists have with him, he is also thought about as “the first to detect insincerity” (80) or as the one “who inspires poetry” (81). His whole character and personality is, as their reality, composed of the impressions his friends have of him, and once these impressions are unified, a coherent picture is formed.

Eric Warner in his work on *The Waves* points out that “there is a continual process of comment or reflection upon how one or more of the others would react to this or that sight, incident or event.”⁸ This shows how strongly these seven people are dependent on each other. As has already been discussed, the central character of this bond is Percival. He is a representation of stability which is not reachable for some of the characters. Neville emphasizes this situation by pointing out that: “without Percival there is no solidity. We are silhouettes, hollow phantoms moving mistily without a background.” (129) Furthermore, he also represents the before mentioned shared consciousness. Neville is not the only one who directly

⁸ Eric Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 75.

acknowledges that he does not belong only to himself, but also to the others. Bernard also ponders upon his identity and his relation to others: “I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs.” (221) With this sense of simultaneity, novel emphasizes the impressions of the present moments that are occurring at the same time in multiple minds while still forming one whole. There is no moment in this continuous duration that can be placed before or after another one: the present is the only thing there is, and it expands and stretches according to the significance of the given moment. This is the representation of the inner, subjective time in which the self is able to dissolve with others. Bergson writes: “What duration is there existing outside us? The present only, or if we prefer the expression, simultaneity.”⁹ Gillies points out that Woolf’s philosophy can be described as her insisting on the idea: “that real living occurred in extraordinary moments of being in which time was conflated and all moments existed simultaneously.”¹⁰ This philosophical belief can be seen as a direct link between Bergson and Woolf.

The dichotomy of the inner psychological time and external time is emphasized by the characters holding on to the present moments that are embodied in their shared consciousness. The scene of farewell in the restaurant points out the strong feelings the protagonists have for the shared moments, which are untouchable by the reality of the external world and time: “Do not move, do not let the swing-door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globes itself here, among these lights, these peelings, this litter of breadcrumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it for ever.” (142) This is Louis referring to Percival’s departure. As has been already mentioned, Percival is the element that holds the group together. He is their link with something much higher than the ordinary life and external merciless time. This is also emphasized by another monologue, this time made by Jinny: “Let us hold it for one moment,”

⁹ Bergson 227.

¹⁰ Gillies 131.

said Jinny; ‘love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again.’’(142) This collective consciousness is a representation of their collective memories, feelings, and perceptions of the world. However, this realm is very much different from the external reality. The intimate moments that they share are closed in their own sphere, and the encounter with reality is recognized as painful. Based on the chosen extracts, it can be deduced that characters do not want to let go and go into the world alone without their other counterparts. Possibly the best conclusion of this moment is provided by Bernard, who seems to be the most aware of the before mentioned dichotomy:

What is to come? I ask, brushing the crumbs from my waistcoat, what is outside? We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments. We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. (142)

Bernard is the one who acknowledges the difference between what they created and between what is out there, in the external world driven by the mechanical movement of time. Their shared consciousness, in which moments flow according to the significance they have, makes them free. They “are not slaves” blindly following the precise ticking of the clock. Jane de Gay describes the scene in the restaurant as “example of Woolf’s ‘moments of being’, as different elements are fused together in a totality”¹¹

However, the confidence that the characters have in what they have created is drastically disturbed by the news of Percival’s death. The following chapter in the novel provides the reaction of all the protagonists, and all the responses are in a way similar: not only is Percival dead, but their shared past, memories and their impenetrable world are gone with him. Neville, for example, thinks: “All is over. The lights of the world have gone out [...] Barns and summer days in the country, rooms where we sat—all now lie in the unreal world which is gone. [...]

¹¹ Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf’s Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2006) 172.

From this moment I am solitary.” (144) The memories of their past seem to be lost due to Percival’s death. It is after his dying that Percival’s role in the group is really emphasized. It seems that everything is lost and their collective consciousness is shattered to pieces. Such reception of his death is understandable, since all that they had was created by each one of them taking part in the creation of their own realm. This realm, however, can no longer exist because one piece is missing.

This chapter provides also a different confrontation with reality: when Bernard ponders upon the death of his dear friend and is suddenly disturbed by the flow of external life, which does not stop just because someone has died: “Yet already signals begin, beckonings, attempts to lure me back. Curiosity is knocked out for only a short time. One cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour.” (146) It is evident that Bernard is dragged into his everyday life where he has to face the reality imposed by the external time.

There seems to be just one character who struggled with the confrontation of the outer time even before Percival’s death and that is Rhoda. Right at the beginning of the novel, Rhoda is struggling with a math problem in a class. She sees that all of her friends are able to find the answer but she cannot, and she has to stay in the class after the lesson is over. She observes the clock on the wall and thinks:

But I have no answer. The others are allowed to go. They slam the door. Miss Hudson goes. I am left alone to find an answer. The figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone. The clock ticks. The two hands are convoys marching through a desert. [...] Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join—so—and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, “Oh save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!” (69-70)

She is struggling to find her place in a world inside the loop of time. The loop of time represents the external time, which is imposed on everyone but she fails to participate. Her character can be described even as a parallel to Septimus from *Mrs Dalloway*. His inability to accept and adjust himself to the external linear time ends up in his suicide, and Rhoda’s fate can be viewed

in a similar way. It seems that she too struggled with the perception of reality. Even though she eventually commits suicide, she was first trying to find her balance between her individuality and dissolution into others: "So I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny. But I will stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed; I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard. Now I cannot sink; cannot altogether fall through the thin sheet now." (72) It is evident that she attempted to psychologically secure her place in the world. However, this particular internal monologue is concluded by her thinking: "Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched" (73) Rhoda felt as if she was engulfed by the darkness and it can be said that she had a very poor sense of her own identity. At one point in the novel, she says that she "has no face" and that their world is a "real world" but she is not part of it (82). Rhoda is very different from the rest of her friends. She is torn between wanting to be alone and between wanting to be part of the outer world. Eventually, she decides to kill herself, which can be interpreted as the ultimate failure to accept the outer, external world and the everyday life which is dependent on the outer flow of time.

5.1. Time and its impact on the theme of identity

The example of Rhoda's suicide is probably the most extreme representation of an unsuccessful desire to find one's identity in the ever-changing world. It is important to point out that the search for a stable representation of the self is not only Rhoda's concern. Other characters have to tackle this problem as well. The transition to the self is not stable, it is moving alongside time. From this point of view, these two abstract concepts cannot be divided. The identity is dependent on time because the journey to the self is happening in the flow of time. Nevertheless, identity is not undermining the significance of time in this novel. By staging these two concepts together, Woolf enhanced another feature of time and, in fact, she enhanced its power in one's life as well.

As has been mentioned before, all six characters are struggling to catch the essence of who they really are. Nevertheless, Bernard is a protagonist whose identity seems to evolve and change the most throughout the novel. In the final part of the book, he summarizes his life and one can observe a rather tremendous transition in his concept of the self and his own identity. His desire to be, to speak, and to represent what the romantic writers, and other great thinkers, represented changes: "How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! [...] I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement." (204) The eagerness to build his identity on someone else's phrases and vocabulary ceased to interest him. With maturity, the realization that one needs to search for his own interpretation of the world and adaptation of his own phrases came.

The connection and central consciousness of all six characters was already discussed, nevertheless, in the final chapter, Bernard acknowledges the uniqueness of all his friends: "But we were all different. The wax - the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us." (207) Such recognition could not have happened sooner because it is only with time, its flow and all the events surrounding this flux that one consciously realizes his own self. Woolf juxtaposed this vital transformation of the self with an image of a willow tree, representing the childhood of the characters as well as a stable point in the endlessly changing world. Bernard remembers how he used to sit there with his friends while observing the movement of life: "Through its fine plumes specked with little pricked ears of green in spring, of orange in autumn, I saw boats; buildings; I saw hurrying, decrepit women." (213) This depiction continues with the dichotomy of a stable tree and changing nature of his identity: "The tree alone resisted our eternal flux. For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly." (214) It seems that Bernard decided to draw a

line and close this chapter once he left the tree: "I formed; a drop fell; I fell - that is, from some completed experience I had emerged. I rose and walked away-I, I, I; not Byron, Shelley, Dostoevsky, but I, Bernard" (218). The tree can be interpreted as one part of his life from which he moves on to the adult life. He was all the other people in college but not himself. Nevertheless, in time this has changed. Bernard outgrew the roles he has imposed on himself and enters the life which is "pleasant". It is the life in which "Tuesday follows Monday; then comes Wednesday" (221).

Time is subjective when it comes to its flow, and its importance in one's life is subjective as well. Time provided Bernard with the ability to become himself and to find his true identity. Time is also important for Neville but mostly for other reasons. He rejects Bernard's wish to be somebody else: "Once you were Tolstoi's young man; now you are Byron's young man; perhaps you will be Meredith's young man; then you will visit Paris in the Easter vacation and come back wearing a black tie some detestable Frenchman whom nobody has ever heard of. Then I shall drop you." (74) Neville resents the idea that he should be so many people and not himself. At the same time, he acknowledges the influence of his surroundings and the things he enjoys on his personality. The only difference is that he does not allow ideas, conducts and beliefs that are not his own to become part of him: "I am one person - myself. I do not impersonate Catullus, whom I adore" (74) However, his own identity is also not fixed and he is in search of who he really is. During the dinner, when all the characters meet, Neville states that "he is never stagnant" (110) and he never knows how he will change throughout the day. It seems that Neville is also desperate: he is desperate to find who he is and concludes his monologue by saying: "in this pursuit I shall grow old." (110) The passage of time represents for Neville an opportunity. In this case, it is the chance to find his own self which can be seen as the most important feature of time.

The character whose identity is probably the most stable one is Louis. Louis is from the beginning of the novel identified mostly in terms of his nationality. His father is an Australian banker and as a child, Louis was embarrassed for his different accent. It is precisely the dinner party at which he manages to acknowledge his uniqueness and inability to act as someone else: "I smoothed my hair when I came in, hoping to look like the rest of you. But I cannot, for I am not single and entire as you are. I have lived a thousand lives already." (109) This transition is also a transition bounded in time. From a boy concealing his Australian accent, Louis becomes a man who is aware of the impossibility to be anyone else but himself.

Female characters, except for Rhoda, are rather peripheral when it comes to the theme of identity and change in time. Throughout the novel, Susan's inclination to nature is enhanced. From a very young age, she is aware of what she loves and what she hates. It seems that at first she struggles to establish her identity at home. Susan's father is a clergyman and it is possible that her parents wanted her to become a lady, not a farmer's wife: "But I am already set on my pursuit. I see insects in the grass. Though my mother still knits white socks for me..." (12) Nevertheless, it does not seem that her marrying a farmer brought any contempt to her life. She has a feeling that something has escaped her while she was taking on the role of a mother and wife: "Still I gape like a young bird, unsatisfied, for something that has escaped me." (200) It seems that time made Susan surrender: she succumbed to the roles external world imposed on her. Susan is mostly preoccupied with taking care of her children. Her role of a mother is such a tremendous part of her identity that she cannot see beyond it. This suggests that Woolf decided to show the indifferent nature of time not only on the examples of death in the novel, but also on proposing that time shall pass to quickly if one is not careful.

The comment of Susan on her feeling that something has escaped her is followed by Jinny's statement: "After our fire, there is nothing left to put in lockets." (*The Waves*, 200) It seems that the biggest obstacle for Jinny, when it comes to the perception of time, is its

merciless flow. The fire she mentions may suggest the fire one possesses when he or she is young. Her character is often described with regard to her love affairs and her beauty: “It was Susan who first became wholly woman, purely feminine. [...] She was born to be the adored of poets...” (213) Her feminine features and conducts are enhanced throughout the novel. This would explain why she is afraid of losing the fire. Part of her identity is based on her beauty, and once that goes away there is “nothing left to put in lockets.” As with Susan, Jinny is also a victim of the roles imposed on her. It is a role of a beauty, a lover who, however, is bound to cease in time. The time plays a significant role in her life because its merciless nature is what will eventually take Jinny’s sparkle, and everything she has built her identity on, away.

All these changes and transformations are summarized by Louis at the Hampton Court:

“We changed, we became unrecognisable,” said Louis. “Exposed to all these different lights, what we had in us (for we are all so different) came intermittently, in violent patches, spaced by blank voids, to the surface as if some acid had dropped unequally on the plate. I was this, Neville that, Rhoda different again, and Bernard too.”(107)

This quest for personal identity is commented on by Warner: “the binding power which drew them together disappears, and the six become progressively fragmented, sealed in the encroachments of established identity, middle age, and personal endeavour.”¹² The loss of binding power can be certainly observed in the novel. The transitions that are taking place throughout the novel are very complex, affecting every character in a slightly different way. This proposes a different aspect of time than that discussed before. *The Waves* displays not only the dichotomy between psychological and external time, but also the subjective perception of the passage of time and the various effects such flow can have on various people

¹² Warner 69-70.

6. Conclusion

The primary subject of this thesis is time, its perception and division displayed in three novels written by a modernist writer Virginia Woolf. The Bergsonian notion that time can be divided into *durée* and *l'étendu* was firstly explored on *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and finally on *The Waves*. The thesis analysed this dichotomy on the juxtaposition between the two types of time on particular representations of the inner and external flow of time. The psychological inner flux is mostly represented by the stream of consciousness technique and by a technique that Woolf herself called “tunnelling.” The method of tunnelling allows readers to learn about life of the characters from their memories and from memories that others have of them. This technique was used predominantly in *Mrs Dalloway*, nevertheless, the other two works also display the notion of this method. The stream of consciousness is employed equally in all three novels and it functions as the representation of what Bergson referred to as *durée*. Woolf portrayed the concept of *l'étendu* on external factors such as the sounds of Big Ben in *Mrs Dalloway*, ocean and the movement of the sun in *The Waves*, and depiction of the state of house under the condition of shadows and light in *To the Lighthouse*. The indifferent flow of the external time is enhanced in all three novels and this merciless nature is presented on death. Death plays an important role when depicting life as a cycle. However, it also points out the indifferent nature of time. *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves* share events of suicide, nevertheless, each novel displays a different impact of such event. In *Mrs Dalloway*, suicide leads to an even stronger appreciation of life, while in *The Waves* it functions as a tool to tackle the problem of the search for one's identity. As mentioned before, death works also as the portrayal of the cycle of life and it suggests the impossibility to divide life into segments. The concept of timelessness is shared by all three works, nevertheless, each novel works with this notion in a slightly different manner. It is thus evident that despite time being an essential theme in these works, Woolf managed to depict its qualities and impacts differently in each novel by employing

various metaphors and concepts, ranging from the portrayal of a collective memory in *Mrs Dalloway* to the metaphors of nature in *The Waves*. This suggests that Woolf's treatment of time is very complex, and she manages to capture life and its variety in a unique manner.

As mentioned before, Virginia Woolf was a modernist writer and an exceptional thinker, nevertheless, the thesis also points out some of the most influential thinkers of the period, suggesting that Woolf could be inspired by their notions and theories of time and the process of thinking. The personality whose theory is discussed the most, both in the introductory part and in the subsequent analyses of the works, is Henri Bergson. Even though Woolf never admitted reading Bergson, it is highly probable that she encountered his work.

The thesis demonstrates that besides employing similar notions and dichotomy of time as Henri Bergson, Woolf managed to create highly complex and unique works of art, while suggesting that time belongs to one of the most significant factors in one's perception of life. Woolf expressed the desire that she wanted to create a very close representation of life in her novels and it can be concluded that by employing techniques emerging in modernism, new radical theories and her own genius she managed to create a meticulous and authentic representation of life and its flow.

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