

Figuring out ‘who tells the story’ from the personal pronoun  
—the use of *one* in Virginia Woolf’s short stories—

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## 1. Introduction

In this presentation, personal pronouns in three of Virginia Woolf’s short stories are examined. The texts are: “The lady in the Looking Glass” (hereafter *LLG*), “The Fascination of the Pool” (hereafter *FP*) and “Three Pictures” (hereafter *TP*). In these three stories, the personal pronoun *one* is commonly used. There are also the uses of other personal pronouns such as *I*, *we*, *you* and *they*. The aim of this paper is to interpret what *one* refers to. The interpretation will be achieved by comparing the use of *one* with the use of other personal pronouns in the stories.

In the first section of this paper, the frequency of each personal pronoun in the three stories is shown, and the roles of each personal pronoun are explained. The second section discusses the effects of personal pronouns with reference to particular extracts from the three short stories. The last section shows some specific roles of the pronoun *one* in light of the discussion in the first and second sections.

## 2. Generic pronouns and *one*

The personal pronouns recognised in the three stories along with their frequencies, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 <Personal pronouns in the three stories>

	<i>LLG</i>	<i>FP</i>	<i>TP</i>
<i>I</i>	-	(4)*	8
<i>we</i>	1	5	9
<i>you</i>	-	-	3
<i>they</i>	3	4	1
<i>people</i>	2	(2)	-
<i>one</i>	36	10	24

The table shows only those pronouns which are connected to the narrator as their references. Therefore, instances of *s/he* that refer to characters are omitted. Also shown in the table is *people* because on two occasions in *LLG* it is used in the same way as a generic pronoun.

Except for *I* in Table 1 above, that are *we*, *you*, *they*, *people* and *one* are all included in the generic pronoun (Jespersen, 1961: 4.7<sub>1</sub>). The interpretations of the pronoun *one* are said to be: a reference to a generic person (Jespersen, 1961: 4.7<sub>2</sub>), and “a disguised first person” (Jespersen, 1961: 4.7<sub>4</sub>).

First, *one* is considered as a generic pronoun which indicates “anybody”. Then if those pronouns *we*, *you*, *they*, *people* and *one* are all generic pronouns referring to just “a generic person”, it might be possible to replace *one* with other generic pronouns. However, these pronouns possess different functions when used as generic pronouns. Jespersen (1961: 4.7<sub>1</sub>, 4.7<sub>3</sub>) says that *we* includes the speaker himself even in generic use, *you* also suggests the presence of the hearer or reader, and *they* is equal to *people*, it suggests the exclusion of the speaker and addressee.

Biber *et al.* (2002, 4.12.2) also include *we*, *you* and *they* as generic pronouns and suggest that:

...these generic pronouns tend to retain a trace of their basic meaning as first-, second-, or third-person pronoun.

These explanations above imply that *we*, *you* and *they* possess a more firm “figure” than *one*. The word “figure” represents “the embodiment of physical presence” (Nasu, 2002: 63), which is interpreted as the “actuality” or the “entity” that most personal pronouns provide behind the words.

Even in generic use, *we* suggests the image of the speaker, *you* the addressee, and *they* people who are not the speaker nor the addressee. Each reference represents as first,

second, and third personal pronoun. However, *one* is not included in any grammatical person, and as a generic pronoun, *one* refers to “people in general” and does not suggest any specific figure behind the word. At this point, *one* as a generic pronoun is more ambiguous than *we*, *you*, or *they*.

In Table 1, the personal pronoun *I*, which is used by the narrator in *TP*, is also included. *I* is the definite pronoun which refers to the speaker. *One* is sometimes regarded as an equivalent of *I* representing the speaker. Although the table shows that *one* is used more frequently than *I*, the fact that *I* is employed and articulated by the narrator makes *TP* a first person or *I*-narrative story. The sentence below clearly indicates the presence of the narrator who is referred to *I*.

Who was going to be buried, I asked. (*TP*, 230)

Since the narrator in *TP* employs *I* and *one*, it may be possible to see these pronouns as the same. However, for the same reason with the other personal pronouns above, *I* and *one* cannot be taken as being exactly the same.

The definite pronoun *I* possesses a more stable “figure” than the indefinite pronoun *one*. Moreover, *I* is implicative of the existence of *you* as an addressee, whereas *one*

does not imply any particular image as an addressee. This effect suggests the figureless-ness of *one*, even though *one* certainly refers to “a person”.

### 3. The point of view of *one*

Having considered the effect of the personal pronoun *one*, sentences from the stories will be examined in this section.

As the results in Table 1 show, the personal pronoun *one* is the main pronoun that the narrators in these three stories employ. In some sentences, it seems obvious that the existence of somebody represented by *one*.

- (1) a) The house was empty, and *one felt*, since *one was the only person in the drawing-room*, like one of those naturalists who, covered with grass and leaves ... (*LLG*, 221)  
b) *One drew closer* to the pool and parted the reeds so that one could see deeper ... (*FP*, 227)  
c) *One felt* that something ought to be done. (*TP*, 229)
- (my emphasis)

The words in italics: “one felt”, “one was the only person in the drawing-room” and “one drew closer”, imply the existence of someone represented by the pronoun *one*. Expressions such as “one felt”, “one drew closer” indicate personal moves, which people cannot force others to do. The expression “one was the only person in the

drawing-room” presents the situation that someone exists in the story and is seeing things in the story. Even though these extracts seem to be subjective, the impression differs when the instances of *one* in the sentences are replaced by another first person pronoun, which also represents subjectivity.

- (2) a) The house was empty, and *I felt*, since *I was the only person in the drawing-room*, like one of those naturalists who, covered with grass and leaves...
- b) *I drew closer* to the pool and parted the reeds so that *I could see* deeper ...
- c) *I felt* that something ought to be done.

Those *ones* in (1) are substituted with *I* in (2), because the sentences extracted from the original texts seem to indicate personal viewpoints. Examining those sentences in (2), the image of the narrator represented by the definite first-person pronoun *I* becomes clear. The definiteness is more clear than the image represented by the pronoun *one* in the sentences (1). The reader may create a person who “feels” or “stands in the drawing-room”, or “draw close to the pool” by reading sentences with *I*. On the other hand, what can be imagined from the text with the pronoun *one* is the ambiguous figure. *One* may imply the existence and the vision, but it does not represent a certain image behind the word as much as *I* does. At the same time, the figure provoked by the use of *I* is not as anonymous as that provoked by the use of *one*.

There are cases in the texts when *one* can be understood to be either generic or to be a first person pronoun. They are shown in (3) below.

- (3) a) *One* must fix *one's* mind upon her [Isabella Tyson] at that very moment.  
(*LLG*, 223)  
b) It is impossible that *one* should not see pictures... (*TP*, 228)  
(my emphasis)

The sentences a) and b) above present the ambiguous point of view of *one*, because they lack absolute information determining the point of view as personal or generic. Assuming these instances of *one* are generic, they can be replaced by other generic pronouns. Examples are shown in (4).

- (4) a) *We* must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand ...  
b) It is impossible that *you* should not see pictures...

Comparing the sentences in (3) and (4), the reader can sense the difference in the figure of the narrator that is represented by each personal pronoun. Even though *we* and *you* used in (4) are generic pronouns, the figure of the narrator creates a firm image. However, in the case of *one* as in (3), it is not so obvious that there is someone who is definitely responsible for these utterances, because *one* does not imply any specific image of a personal figure behind the word.

The unique effect of *one* is observed when a generic pronoun, such as *people* in *LLG*, is substituted by *one*. (5) and (6) show the difference of the effect.

- (5) a) *People* should not leave looking-glasses hanging in *their* rooms any more than *they* should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime. (*LLG*, 221)
- b) Something it seemed as if they [the things in the room] knew more about her [Isabella Tyson] than *we*... (*LLG*, 222)
- (my emphasis)

In (5)-a), *people* is employed to represent a generic state, and its possessive form *their* also indicates a general idea as if saying that “not a particular person but everyone in general should not leave looking-glasses hanging”. *We* in (5)-b) is also employed in a generic manner. The change of personal pronoun exhibits the difference when these ‘generic’ pronouns are substituted with *one* as shown in (6).

- (6) a) *One* should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than *one* should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime.
- b) Something it seemed as if they knew more about her than *one*...

When all the pronouns in (5) and (6) are compared, the use of *one* in (6) shows a more

ambiguous image than the generic pronouns in (5) do. This comparison implies that even in expressions of generality, *people* or *we* can give a firmer image of a certain group of people than *one*. *People* and *we* are employed to express the generality.

If the pronoun *one* in these stories were replaced with other personal pronouns, the point of view would change completely. When *one* is replaced by the generic pronoun, the point of view becomes objective, and when it is replaced by *I*, then the viewpoint becomes subjective. On the other hand, if the pronoun *one* is left as it is, it makes the narrator figureless, because the pronoun *one* refers to nobody in particular. Personal pronouns other than *one* fix the point of view either objectively or subjectively, but *one* creates ambiguity and does not fix the point of view. With this characteristic, *one* is recognised as an impersonal, figureless personal pronoun.

#### 4. Defining *one* in Woolf's short stories

The role of *one* in each story varies, and it is possible to examine the effects by looking at sentences from each story. The pronoun *one* in the second sentence of *LLG* represents a personal point of view.

- (7) One could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall. (*LLG*, 221)

The subjectivity is interpreted from underlined words, “that summer afternoon” and “in the hall”. These words indicate the particular time and the particular space in the story and such expressions immediately lead the reader into the story. It may be difficult to say that this sentence conveys completely subjective information by just looking at this single sentence. Even with the determining personal phrases, which are underlined, the pronoun *one* in this sentence may cause an objective reading. In fact, the sentence (7) immediately follows sentence (5)-a) above: “*People* should not leave looking-glasses hanging in *their* rooms any more than *they* should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime” (*LLG*: 221). The generic pronoun *people* in this sentence makes the information definitely objective. The pronoun *one* in sentence (7) seems to be removed from the objective point of view and put closer to subjective point of view.

The use of *one* in *LLG*, might not be taken as a generic pronoun, because there are the generic uses of *people* and *we*. However, it is also true that the use of *one* can give an ambiguous image of the figure. *One* does not express as much subjectivity as *I*, either.

In *FP*, the existence of *one* is acknowledged as the person who sees illusions and who hears voices from the pool. As shown in Table 1, there is the use of *I* in this story, but

those instances of *I* in *FP* belong to the ghosts rising from the pool, therefore *I* in *FP* does not refer to the narrator. By comparing those personal pronouns, the reference of *one* can be interpreted.

- (8) a) And *one* saw a whiskered red face formed in the pool leaning low over it, drinking it. (*FP*: 226)  
b) *I* came here in 1851 after the heat of the Great Exhibition. (*FP*: 226)

(my emphasis)

These two sentences are contiguous. The difference between the two kinds of personal pronouns gives the reader a different impression. The ghost represented by *I* possesses a more stable figure than the narrator of the story who is represented by *one*. This is the reverse situation of *LLG*, because there is a character represented by *I*. By creating a contrast across adjacent sentences, as above, the interpretation of *one* in this story is made closer to being a generic pronoun. However, the use of *one* in *FP* is done in subjective statements as in “one drew closer” or “one could see deeper”, therefore *one* in *FP* stands at the middle position of a subjective and objective interpretation.

“Three Pictures” is an *I*-narrative form, and it also contains *one*. This story is composed of three sections, and the personal pronoun that, represents the narrator changes in each section. The first section, titled “the first picture” employs the personal

pronouns, *one*, *I*, *you*, and *we*. In this section, when these personal pronouns are used they are in subjunctive forms, and therefore seem to present just generic explanations. The personal pronoun that refers to the narrator in the first section is *one*. The second part, titled “the second picture”, uses only *one* as a personal pronoun. The last part, “third picture”, contains *one* and *I*.

The interpretation of *one* changes as the story proceeds from the first to the third section. The following extracts show the change.

- (9) a) It is impossible that *one* should not see pictures... (*TP*, 228)
- b) *One* lay in the dark listening intently. (*TP*, 229)
- c) *One* came on solitary farmhouses. (*TP*, 230)
- d) Who was going to be buried, *I* asked. (*TP*, 230)

Sentence (9)-a) expresses a general statement. This is similar to the extract from *LLG*: “*People* should not leave looking-glasses hanging in *their* rooms...”. Sentence b) from the second section and c) from the third section, are read with a more subjective point of view when compared with the first line a). And finally it becomes *I*, which refers to the narrator. This is the story telling about the ideal, picturesque life, and the story continues to describe such an ideal picturesque life. However, the story ends with a severe reality. The change of personal pronouns from *one* in the sentence a) to *I* in the sentence d) may

express the change of situations in the story.

## 5. Conclusion

The pronoun *one* gives a different impression compared with other personal pronouns when they are used. In this paper, personal pronouns in three of Virginia Woolf's short stories are examined. The narrator in these three stories is represented by pronoun *one*, and its frequent occurrence stands out. Although *one* is considered to be both generic and first-person, when it is substituted with another generic or first-person pronoun, it shows the differences. Generic personal pronouns, such as *we*, *you* and *they* give a definitely objective point of view. On the other hand, a first-person pronoun, such as *I*, will definitely give a subjective point of view. These personal pronouns give the narrator a position as a character or participant in the story. The pronoun *one*, however, gives neither point of view, because *one* can be figureless and ambiguous compared with other personal pronouns.

It may be true that *one* represents "somebody" who tells the story, but it seems difficult to capture a clear image or figure of the "somebody" represented by the pronoun *one*.

<Note>

\*brackets are added because *I* is used by the character in *FP*, and *people* is used as just a noun.

<text>

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