

**Can We Appreciate her ‘Moments of Being’?  
- A Stylistic Analysis of Woolf’s Short Fiction**

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**0. Introduction**

I discuss stylistic and narrative technique of Virginia Woolf, focusing upon her short fiction. Virginia Woolf is one of the most important modernist writers who was most interested in presenting the human consciousness and searching for a new and original mode of writing to do it throughout her career. In a series of her creative novels, we can find considerable shifts in the mode of writing after *To the Lighthouse* (1927): her works can be divided into two groups in terms of style of writing employed to represent human consciousness.

The first group of works from *The Voyage Out* (1915) to *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is characterized by its ‘realistic’ description of human mind, especially ‘individual consciousness’. In this group, the author attempts to represent the human mind as it is. Vivid and detailed description of what happens in human mind is characteristic of the first group. Here I will call this group the works of ‘internal realism’.

The internal realism is contrastive to the ‘external realism’ characterizing many 19<sup>th</sup> century novels. In her early experimental works, she had developed this method by ‘record[ing] the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall’ (Woolf 1967: 107). In the works of internal realism, the third person narrator is used, the development of plot is minimized, and the treatment of physical time is drastically reduced, so that the world of individual consciousness of the character is realistically described.

On the other hand, in the second group of her works, after *The Waves* (1931), Woolf is more interested in the universal aspects of human mind and the more abstract way of writing is used to represent them. In the second group the author seems to be more interested in the unconscious or subconscious part of mind. In *The Waves*, for instance, the first person narrator is utilized to express the character’s visionary experience. In *The Years* (1937) and *The Between the Acts*(1941), on the other hand, while the character-centred mode of thought presentation is discarded, the character’s visionary experiences or unconscious mental states are frequently described. Such states of mind are difficult to deal with from the character’s own point of view. As a result, the last two works are narrated by the third person narrator.

In this presentation, I focus upon one of the short stories written in the period of the shift of Woolf’s concern, between *To the lighthouse* and *The Waves*, that is, ‘Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins have no Points’ written in 1927, just after the completion of *To the Lighthouse*. This work has frequently attracted critics’ attention for its lesbian content. On the other hand, its formal aspects have been generally neglected. I will attempt to clarify that this work can be described as the ultimate form of her earlier method, ‘internal realism’. As evidence for my argument, I would like to illustrate the refinements and the accompanying difficulties noticeable in the narrative techniques of this short

fiction.

I shall emphasize three points. Firstly, 'Moments of Being' can be regarded as the last work in which Woolf thoroughly exploits the world of *individual* consciousness. Secondly, this work marks a turning point in Woolf's experimental writing. And finally, this work may have incited Woolf to search for a new method by which to represent *universal aspects* of mind. After confirming these three significant points, I shall further discuss whether the presentation of internal truth in this short story should be appreciated by the reader or not.

### **1. Background of 'Moments of Being: Slater's Pins have no Points'**

When Woolf was about to complete *To the Lighthouse*, she felt a sense of accomplishment towards her own internal realism method. In her diary of November 23 1926, she wrote:

My present opinion is that it [*To the Lighthouse*] is easily the best of my books: fuller than J'sR. [*Jacob's Room*] and less spasmodic, occupied with more interesting things than Mrs. D. [*Mrs Dalloway*], and not complicated with all that desperate accompaniment of madness. It is freer and subtler, I think. Yet I have no idea yet of any other to follow it [*To the Lighthouse*]: which may mean that I have made **my method perfect** and it will now stay like this and serve whatever use I wish to put it to. (*Diary III 117*)

She also wrote down her idea of this short work in her diary.

Yet **I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman**, which shall all be told on one occasion; and 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. (*Diary III 118*)

In the summer of 1927, she wrote the short story 'Moments of Being' and, as Woolf wrote, this work presents a woman's life which is told 'on one occasion [of] the fall of a flower'. So, while a flower and a pin are being searched for, Miss Julia Craye's life is presented through Fanny Wilmot's point of view.

Julia is an unmarried woman and a piano teacher to Fanny. When she offers a piano lesson to Fanny, a corsage of a flower falls down from Julia's dress. The whole story is developed around this one moment when Fanny is looking for the pin of the corsage. Baldwin (1989: 52) points out that the actual time of the external event is 'perhaps two minutes.'

### **2. The refinements of the work as 'a completed version of internal realism'**

As seen in Woolf's work of 'internal realism', the actual stream of Fanny's thought and feeling is realistically described. Here the two contrastive worlds, the external and the internal, are created. The external event is so simple that it functions as backbone of the framework of the work. On the other hand, the internal world consists of the character's impressions, emotions, and the past memories. The description of the external actions is extremely simplified. In fact, only one incident occurs as the external story.

In the following passages, the two characters' (Fanny and Julia) external actions and events are reported. The story consists of fourteen paragraphs and each paragraph is numbered (there is no action or event in paragraphs 2, 7 and 9).

[1] 'Slater's pins have no points - don't you always find that?' said Miss Craye, turning round as the rose fell out of Fanny Wilmot's dress, and Fanny stooped with her ears full of the music, to look for the pin on the floor.

[3]..., Fanny Wilmot thought, looking for the pin,

[4]..., (Fanny Wilmot knew ...)...

[5]..., thought Fanny Wilmot, as she looked for the pin ...

[6] It was so that Julia looked too, as she sat half turned on the music stool, smiling. ... And she picked up the carnation which had fallen on the floor, while Fanny searched for the pin. ...

[8]... Fanny wondered, with her eyes on the floor...

[10]... Fanny Wilmot reflected. (Where had that pin fallen?)...

[11] ... Fanny Wilmot smiled ...

[12] Fanny Wilmot saw the pin on the carpet; she picked it up. She looked at Miss Craye. ... She sat there, half turned away from the piano, with her hands clasped in her holding the carnation upright ... Fanny stared.

[13] All seemed transparent for a moment to gaze of Fanny Wilmot, as if looking through Miss Craye, she saw ... She saw ... She saw..., saw Julia...; saw...; saw... She saw Julia.

[14] She saw Julia open her arms; .... Julia kissed her. Julia possessed her. 'Slater's pin have no points,' Miss Craye said, laughing queerly and relaxing her arms, as Fanny Wilmot pinned the flower to her breast with trembling fingers.

(Woolf 1989: 215-

220)

The story begins with Julia's direct speech, 'Slater's pins have no points,' and throughout the text the fallen pin is repeated as a signal to sustain the ongoing external world of the story. This structure may be the most established version of the internal realism technique to be found in Woolf's works.

### **3. The limitations of internal realism method**

On the other hand, the story can be said to be the ultimate version of internal realism, and at the same time, the work reveals the limitations of the internal realism method. For example, we can point out that the extreme simplicity of external story is incongruous with the complexity of the inner description. One problem of this work is that too many thoughts are embedded in a single character-mind. It is often difficult to identify to whom each thought should be attributed. The presentation of inner thought entails too many minor details and Woolf's internal realism often imposes too much of a burden on the reader.

### **3.1. Analysis 1**

Let us look at paragraph 3, which may be most confusing to the reader. When we read this paragraph, we need to understand its close link with the preceding paragraph. Paragraph 2 extracted below presents the associations and imaginations occurring in Fanny's consciousness.

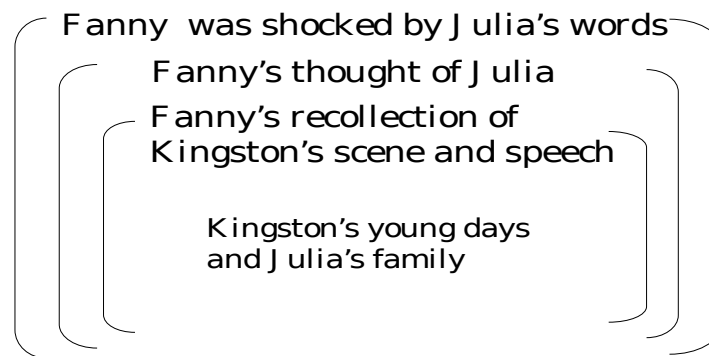
#### Paragraph 2

(1) The words gave her an extraordinary shock, as Miss Craye struck the last chord of the Bach fugue. (2) Did Miss Craye actually go to Slater's and buy pins then, Fanny Wilmot asked herself, transfixed for a moment? (3) Did she stand at the counter waiting like anybody else, and was she given a bill with coppers wrapped in it, and did she slip them into her purse and then, an hour later, stand by her dressing table and take out the pins? (4) What need had she of pins? (5) For she was not so much dressed as cased, like a beetle compactly in its sheath, blue in winter, green in summer. (6) What need had she of pins — Julia Craye — who lived, it seemed, in the cool, glassy world of Bach fugues, playing to herself what she liked and only consenting to take one or two pupils at the Archer Street College of Music (so the Principal, Miss Kingston said) as a special favour to herself, who had 'the greatest admiration for her in every way'. (7) Miss Craye was left badly off, Miss Kingston was afraid, at her brother's death. (8) Oh, they used to have such lovely things, when they lived at Salisbury and her brother Julius was, of course, a very well-known man: a famous archaeologist. (9) It was a great privilege to stay with them, Miss Kingston said ('My family had always known them — they were regular Salisbury people,' Miss Kingston said), but a little frightening for a child; one had to be careful not to slam the door or bounce into the room unexpectedly. (10) Miss Kingston, who gave little character sketches like this on the first day of term while she received cheques and wrote out receipts for them, smiled here. (11) Yes, she had been rather a tomboy; she had bounced in and set all those green Roman glasses and things jumping in their case. (12) The Crayes were none of them married. (13) The Crayes were not used to children. (14) They kept cats. (15) The cats, one used to feel, knew as much about the

Roman urns and things as anybody.

The figure below shows the embedding structure of multiple layers constructed in paragraph 2. As in the other parts of the work, the words articulated by Julia: 'Slater's pins have no points', trigger a variety of associations in Fanny's consciousness. The reader has to construct one version of Fanny who was shocked by Julia's words, and another version of Fanny who thinks about Julia's life. Moreover, the reader is also required to construct further version of Fanny who is recollecting Polly Kingston's speech. In her speech, Fanny had some idea of Kingston's young days and Julia's family. Thus, in Fanny's thought, the embedding structure of multiple layers is established and in this paragraph plural viewpoints, such as Fanny's and Kingston's, are intermingled.

### Paragraph 2



Then, in the next paragraph, paragraph 3, Fanny starts to imagine the old time young Kingston and Julia's brother spent, based upon the information about Julia presented in Paragraph 2.

### Paragraph 3

(1)Perhaps then, Fanny Wilmot thought, looking for the pin, Miss Craye said that about 'Slater's pins having no points', at a venture. (2)None of the Crayes had ever married. (3)She knew nothing about pins - nothing whatever. (4)But she wanted to break the spell that had fallen on the house; to break the pane of glass which separated them from other people. (5)When Polly Kingston, that merry little girl, had slammed the door and made the Roman vases jump, Julius, seeing that no harm was done (that would be his first instinct) looked, for the case was stood in the window, Polly skipping home across the fields; looked with the look his sister often had, that lingering, desiring look.'

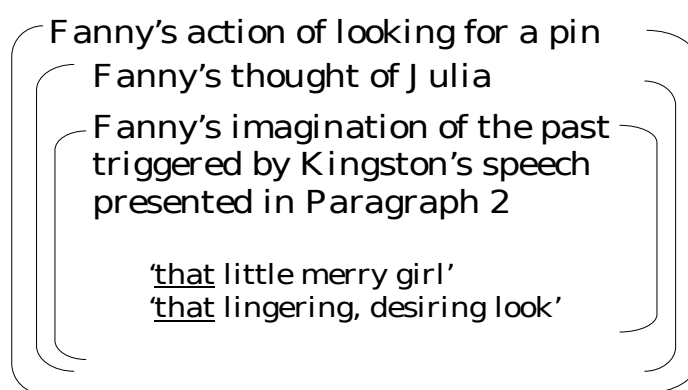
(Woolf 1989, 216: The underlining is mine.)

It is worth discussing why the demonstrative pronoun, 'that', in sentence (5) is used. In sentence (1), because of the reporting phrase, 'Fanny Wilmot thought,' the reader is encouraged to retain Fanny's thinking frame, and the

sentences from (1) to (5) can all be interpreted as Fanny’s thought. Therefore, two phrases, including the demonstrative pronouns, ‘that merry little girl’ and ‘that lingering, desiring look’, are regarded as focalized by Fanny. However, Fanny has never seen little Polly Kingston (‘merry little girl’) or Julius’s (Julia’s brother’s) look (‘lingering, desiring look’). ‘That’ is usually employed as a marker to refer to what has been seen before or already known. Therefore, the use of ‘that’ might be strange here.

If readers remember that Kingston refers to her younger days in her speech, they can interpret ‘that merry little girl’ as reflecting the viewpoint of Fanny who knows Polly indirectly. In the same way, ‘that lingering, desiring look’ is based upon Kingston’s recollection developed in Fanny’s thought in the previous paragraph. In both cases, the demonstrative pronoun ‘that’ suggests that Kingston’s viewpoint is brought into Fanny’s mind. The following figure shows the embedding structure in this passage.

### Paragraph 3



As this passage shows, on the one hand Woolf pays close attention to details so that Fanny’s free association is minutely and precisely represented. On the other hand, such details of Julia’s are too trivial for the reader to keep in mind. Such embedding structure can prevent the reader from retaining coherence necessary for reading logically.

### 3.2 Analysis 2

Let me now examine another passage, where the referent of the personal pronoun is difficult to identify, due to such a complicated embedding structure. In paragraph 7, Fanny recollects the evening when she had a piano lesson from Julia. The reader may be confused as to whom the female personal pronoun ‘her’ refers to; Fanny or Julia.

### Paragraph 7

(1)None of the Crayes had married, Fanny Wilmot remembered. (2)She had in mind how one evening when the lesson had lasted longer than usual and it was dark, Julia Craye had said, ‘It’s the use of men, surely, to

protect us,' smiling at her that same odd smile, as (a)she stood fastening (b)her cloak, which made (c)her like the flower, conscious to (d)her finger tips of youth and brilliance, but, like the flower too, Fanny suspected, inhibited.

(Woolf 1985: 217; The underlining is mine.)

The first sentence; 'Fanny Wilmot remembered', encourages the reader to read the subsequent part in Fanny's remembering frame. Sentence (2) manifests a typical style that Woolf uses, in order to present the subtle states of mind developed along with ongoing action. The sentence structure is long and complex with many clauses and phrases intermingled. Therefore, the referent of the personal pronouns 'she' and 'her' is difficult to identify. From a linguistic point of view, either Fanny or Julia could be the referent.

You will regard the pronoun (a) (b) as Fanny, if you construct Fanny who is putting on her cloak before leaving after the lesson. You will regard the pronoun (c) (d) as Fanny, if you construct Julia who holds the flower in her hand, not in the past but at the same moment as Fanny is looking for the pin. Thus you can notice that Fanny now has an illusion that she is held by Julia like the flower. This is a quite subtle state of mind, developed in Fanny's inside. If you do not properly understand such contexts, you cannot accurately interpret these personal pronouns.

To show how difficult this is, it will be instructive to refer to three versions of Japanese translation: (1) Kawamoto 1999, (2) Tonegawa 1998, and (3) Kuzukawa 1994 [1932]). In the three versions, the interpretations of the personal pronoun are not consistent. While Kawamoto interprets all of the four personal pronouns as referring to Fanny, for example, in Kuzukawa's translation they all refer to Julia.

Proper interpretation of this passage is essential for appreciation of the climactic moment which conveys the most sensitively entangled emotions of the two women. If readers do not associate Fanny with the flower (both symbolize inhibition), they could not appreciate the last moment of the scene, where Julia finally holds Fanny. Understanding the connection between past event and present moment is necessary in order to appreciate the heroine's subtle emotion developed in her relationship with Julia. On the other hand, the complicated embedding structure may confuse readers, making it extremely difficult for them properly to comprehend the context.

#### **4. The evaluation of 'truth' and limitations of internal realism**

I have illustrated the possible problems caused by the embedding structure in this short story. I would like to consider the question whether we can appreciate 'moments of being' in the short story. Guiguet, who comprehensively discusses Woolf's short stories, favourably recognizes the 'truth' presented in this story.

'The New Dress', 'Moments of Being' and 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass'

are each in its way studies of those special moments which reveal the truth about a human being; in this, they link up with *Mrs Dalloway* and, more, with *To the Lighthouse*; but they are less concerned with repeating Lily Briscoe's vision than with developing its potentialities and trying to go beyond these.

(Guiguet 1965: 331)

Guiguet deems it as the development of 'the truth' presented in her previous fictions, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. In the moments Guiguet calls 'special', Woolf pursues 'the truth' in the sense that the real existence of a character is perceived through another character's mind. The realistic aspects of Julia's being are captured in Fanny's perception in a moment of looking for a pin. On the other hand, some critics doubt the significance of this 'being'. For example, Hafley writes that Julia's life is accomplished just within Fanny's consciousness and the moment of 'being' ... exists so precariously, so privately, so preposterously' (1956: 143). Actually, in order to grasp a complete picture of Julia's life, readers need to store fragmentary facts and impressions existing in Fanny's mind at the same level of the character, and unite them in their understanding. However, this may be too heavy a burden for the readers to bear.

It is worth analyzing the end of the story, in which such a burden on readers becomes heaviest; This is the climax moment when all the images obtained by Fanny are condensed, and Julia's being is realized. Fanny synthesizes diverse images of Julia. However, in order to realize the moment of Julia's being successfully, the readers are required to remember specific words and phrases used for Julia's look, her past stories, her family, and Julia's own words. For example, the readers could not appreciate this last scene without understanding the implication of 'the green Roman vases' (3). The phrase referring to 'the Roman vases' appears four times through the work.

(a) Yes, she had been rather a tomboy; she had bounced in and set all those green Roman glasses and things jumping in their case.

(Woolf 1989, 215: The underling is mine.)

(b) The cats, one used to feel, knew as much about the Roman urns and things \_\_\_\_\_ as \_\_\_\_\_ anybody.

(215)

(c) When Polly Kingston, that merry little girl, had slammed the door and made the Roman vases jump, Julius, seeing that no harm was done (that would be his first instinct) looked ...

(216)

(d) She saw the green Roman vases stood in their case; ...

(220)

In (a), (b) and (c), the vases symbolize the strict family background in which Julia was raised. The readers need to retain this information on Julia's past until



(d) in the last scene. In this way, the accumulation of meanings connoted by each word and phrase is crucial for full appreciation of the climactic moment, in which Julia's fragmentary beings are condensed. Woolf's attempt to describe the most "truthful" Julia's being may be successful in the sense that her whole life is reproduced in the moment. However, it can be said that each disparate aspect of the heroine's is highlighted in the story may be too particular for the readers to maintain interest. The interpretation of such a private moment is not an easy task. We may here discern a limitation of internal realism in this short story.

I have examined the short story which can be regarded as a turning point in Virginia Woolf's experiments in her creative writing. Between writing this short work and writing *The Waves*, Woolf produced two more short stories in 1929. In both, she employs a new narrative style, which is reflected upon her later fictions. I would say that the works written in 1929 are the first step toward Woolf's exploration of 'the world beneath our consciousness.'

## 5. Conclusion

I conclude this presentation with the following three remarks. Firstly, 'Moments of Being' can be regarded as the last work in which Woolf thoroughly exploits the world of individual consciousness. Secondly, this work marks a turning point in Woolf's experimental writings, since through the writing of this short story she must have been aware of technical problems that her internal realism potentially houses. Finally, this work may have incited Woolf to search for a new method by which to represent more *universal aspects* of mind, which is to be developed in her later novels such as *The Waves*, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*.

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