

Breaking the Form, Entering the Mind: Woolf, Faulkner, and the Modernist Novel

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*The “Modernist” movement was in part defined by a departure from traditional narrative form as well as an engagement with the burgeoning field of psychology. Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* and William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* are archetypal examples of this new Modernist style, each serving as an exploration into the fragmented realms of human consciousness as well as acting as commentary on the socio-political upheavals of the era.*

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The first half of the 20th century saw a significant reshaping of literature. This movement, recognized today as the “Modernist” movement, was in part defined by a departure from traditional narrative form as well as an engagement with the burgeoning field of psychology. Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* and William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* are archetypal examples of this new Modernist style, each serving as an exploration into the fragmented realms of human consciousness as well as acting as commentary on the socio-political upheavals of the era.

Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*, published in 1927, demonstrates Woolf’s intricate awareness of the dynamics of family, class, and gender in her native Britain. It tells the story of the Ramsey family and their associates during a series of seemingly unimportant events. The story does not focus not on the action of the plot but instead the intricate inner lives of the characters. Woolf’s use of the “stream of consciousness” style, of which she is a pioneer, allows her to present these intricacies in a comprehensible and intuitive manner. Her narrative focus on internal landscapes and personal revelations portrays the profound but quiet changes that were rippling through society in the aftermath of the first world war.

William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, published in 1930, presents the difficult lives of a rural Southern family, the Bundrens, as they struggle with poverty, death, and isolation in the aftermath of the death of the family matriarch, all set against the background of the Great Depression. Faulkner’s narrative is intimately concerned with existentialism, interspersing introspective internal monologues with crude and devastating action. Through its use of many characters’ points of view, *As I Lay Dying* presents its events as multifaceted, showing their distinct effects on many lives. Faulkner’s narrative demonstrates acute awareness of the socio-economic and technological shifts reshaping rural Southern life and projects these changes onto difficult questions universal to human existence.

Both *To The Lighthouse* and *As I Lay Dying* exemplify the modernist shift in narrative form, each breaking away from traditional storytelling methods to uniquely encapsulate the complexities of the periods portrayed as well as those common to all human existence. Though distinct in style, both novels make great use of innovative narrative techniques. These techniques are foundational to Modernist literature, and one can see these authors’ styles echoing throughout the movement.

Woolf developed the stream of consciousness technique in *To The Lighthouse*, effectively capturing the uninterrupted flow of the characters' thoughts and feelings. This style is evident when Woolf writes,

...[Mrs. Ramsey] listened, as if she waited for some habitual sound, some regular mechanical sound; and then, hearing something rhythmical, half said, half chanted, beginning in the garden, as her husband beat up and down the terrace, something between a croak and a song, she was soothed once more, assured again that all was well, and looking down at the book on her knee found the picture of a pocket knife with six blades which could only be cut out if James was very careful. (Woolf 10-11)

This prose seamlessly transitions from a description of action into Mrs. Ramsey's interpretation of sound, then into Mrs. Ramsey's emotional reaction to the sound, before returning to visual description which is itself firmly placed in the lens of Mrs. Ramsey's perception. This narrative approach blurs the boundaries between the narrator and the character, creating an immersive experience that reflects the complexity of human thought.

Woolf employs multiple perspectives in *To the Lighthouse*, providing a multi-faceted view of the novel's events. The dinner scene, for instance, interweaves the thoughts and observations of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and several others, creating a complex net of perspectives and emotions. This narrative technique serves the narrative function of relating different viewpoints while also exploring the subjective nature of reality and perception, furthering the novel's exploration of its themes.

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* also makes use of multiple narrators and stream of consciousness, but to much different effect. In Faulkner's narrative, events are often recounted out of sequence or from different perspectives, creating a disjointed quality. This serves to contrast the characters against each other through their internal reactions to events, allowing a broader and more nuanced understanding of the characters and their situations. For instance, Darl's long-winded philosophical narration ("Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep" [Faulkner 51-52]) contrasts sharply with Vardaman's simplistic and childlike perspective ("My mother is a fish" [Faulkner, 64]). These differing perspectives allow Faulkner to elaborate on his themes, complicating their resolutions, and also serve the purpose of showing the reader the inner workings of a character's mind and then in a separate section with a different point of view demonstrating the external consequences of their worldview.

Despite their use of similar narrative techniques, the two novels approach the techniques from different angles. Woolf's prose is fluid and lyrical, capturing the minutiae of her characters' internal worlds and highlighting Woolf's emphasis on the subtleties of thought and perception. Faulkner's story, by contrast, is more fragmented and raw, reflecting the disarray of his characters' lives and portraying a more tumultuous internal landscape. These innovations in narrative form are representative of a fundamental shift in storytelling, resonating with contemporary narratives that have inherited the mantle of modernism, continuing to explore complex psychological landscapes and societal issues.

To The Lighthouse is in many ways a reaction to the aftermath of World War I. Rather than discussing the war itself, the novel dances around the subject, serving as a meditation on the psychological impact of living through the event, especially the impact on women and children. The war's presence subtly infuses the novel with a quiet sense of inevitable loss. *As I Lay Dying*, for its part, is concerned with the harsh realities of rural Southern life against the backdrop of the Great Depression. The narrative is centered around the Bundren family's journey to bury their matriarch, Addie. This journey becomes a tool that Faulkner utilizes to examine the struggles faced by rural communities in the South. Key among these struggles are poverty and isolation, widespread issues of southern life that Faulkner became intimately familiar with growing up in Mississippi.

Both Woolf and Faulkner explore the experience of time, the imperfection of memory, existentialism, and the human psyche. Despite these similarities, the themes are explored in distinct ways through the perspective of the authors' backgrounds and the socio-political landscapes they inhabited.

Memory and the passage of time are central to *To The Lighthouse*, acting as definitional aspects of human experience. The novel's division into three segments, especially the central section "Time Passes,"

illustrates the relentless march of time and the erosion of the past. Woolf's portrayal of the brutality of time's inevitable passage is exemplified by the brief, almost casual mention of Andrew Ramsay's death, "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]" (Woolf 94). This treatment of mortality reflects Woolf's own contemplation of life's ephemeral nature, shaped by her experiences in the aftermath of World War I. A story in the Romantic tradition might have waxed lyrically about the tragedy of Andrew's passing, but Woolf bucked this style, and helped establish a new one, by simply mentioning that he died, and noting it as a mercy.

While *To The Lighthouse* begins with casual events and slowly unfolds its themes, Faulkner opens *As I Lay Dying* with Addie Bundren's impending death. This sets a tone of direct engagement with mortality and existential crisis. The tangible struggles of the Bundren family are abstracted in the characters' internal voices, expanding the scope of the subject to include the banality of social convention, the passage of time, and, crucially, the struggle to find meaning in life. This last point is central to every character in the story but is most directly addressed by Darl when he muses "I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not," (Faulkner 51). This thematic confluence is described by Homer Pettey as he writes, "Perception, time, and familial relationships conspire to frustrate Darl's understanding of his own existence" (Pettey 34). Pettey also explains Faulkner's ongoing intellectual engagement with contemporary modernist writers. Faulkner expands the contemporary philosophical discussion around existential questions by insisting that even poor, uneducated farmers struggle with these questions.

Existentialism is also prevalent throughout *To The Lighthouse*, though the vastly different social background and economic status of the characters dramatically alter the novel's interpretation of the topic. Lily Briscoe is an artist, and her character arc involves her learning to embrace the intrinsic value of artistic expression. Towards the end of the novel, she muses to herself "What is the meaning of life? That was all--a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years" (Woolf 112). Though both novels engage with the subject of existential dread the conclusions of these themes differ greatly. *To The Lighthouse* ultimately arrives at a comforting conclusion. The last sentence of the novel ("Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision," [Woolf 145]) shows that despite Lily's questioning of her purpose, that purpose can ultimately be discovered and when realized is actually fulfilling. This starkly contrasts with the grim conclusions to the stories of the Bundren clan, specifically Darl's institutionalization and the pharmacist's abuse of Dewey Dell. *As I Lay Dying* challenges *To The Lighthouse* by portraying a world in which the questions of existentialism have no satisfying answers.

The constrictive nature of gender roles is also prevalent throughout both works, notably relevant to the family matriarchs of both the Ramseys and the Bundrens. The complexity of gender roles in *To The Lighthouse* is detailed in Özlem Uzundemir's "Challenging Gender Roles Through Narrative Techniques: Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*," connecting Woolf's narrative technique to "the changing gender roles from a traditional woman, Mrs. Ramsay, to a modern woman, Lily Briscoe," (Uzundemir 8). Mrs. Ramsay is a character caught between societal expectations and personal desires. Her introspective moments reveal a woman grappling with her sense of self. She wants to challenge traditional narratives of femininity and domesticity, but ultimately she is unable to escape the role that she was raised to. Woolf demonstrates this by showing the ways that Mrs. Ramsey defines herself through her relationship to men in her internal monologue:

she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valour... finally for an attitude towards herself... something trustful, childlike, reverential; which an old woman could take from a young man without loss of dignity and woe betide the girl--pray Heaven it was none of her daughters!--who did not feel the worth of it, and all that it implied, to the marrow of her bones! (Woolf 3)

In this section Mrs. Ramsey is thinking about the futures of her daughters but cannot conceive of that future except to hope that they will grow to appreciate their hypothetical future relationships with men. Lily Briscoe serves as a counterpoint to Mrs. Ramsey's traditionality, serving as "an important focalizer to challenge woman's role in a patriarchal society" (Uzundemir 8). While Mrs. Ramsey cannot break free of the demands and expectations of the men around her, Lily Briscoe spends the novel attempting to extricate herself from

society's expectations of a young woman. At the start of the novel she has internalized a man's opinions about women and art, as shown when she imagines "Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, 'Women can't paint, women can't write...'" but by the end of the novel she has come to discard this prejudice, feeling satisfied with her own work (Woolf 34).

Addie Bundren, for her part, is much more disillusioned with her place in the social hierarchy of her community. For much of the novel, Addie is confined by others to her roles as a wife and mother, but the brief snippets of her perspective show that she is deeply resentful of these roles. The complexity of her resentment towards the role of motherhood and her genuine love for her children is shown as she thinks,

I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride. (Faulkner, 106)

This section not only shows Addie's dissatisfaction with the role of mother, but serves as a concise statement reminding the reader that social roles are, in modern parlance, social constructs that are not inherent to the people that they are used to describe. This message resounds throughout the interwar period, reflecting the ways that social roles that had defined western society for decades or even centuries were being deconstructed at every level of society.

Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* stand as milestones within the Modernist movement for their stylistic innovations and also for their deep explorations of human consciousness and societal shifts. The contrasting narrative styles of Woolf and Faulkner uniquely address the socio-political contexts of their respective settings. Both novels, through their construction and the exploration of their themes, not only provide a window into the minds and lives of their characters but also offer a reflection of the broader societal changes occurring in the early 20th century. Their works continue to resonate, influencing contemporary narratives and encouraging readers to challenge societal structures and contemplate the enduring questions of human existence.

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