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——弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫的小说创作与绘画艺术

Seeking for Significant Forms

——A Study of Virginia Woolf's Novels
in the Context of Modern Painting Art

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Abstract

As a forerunner in British modern literature of the 20th century and core member of the Bloomsbury Group, Virginia Woolf's unique position in the history of British literature is attracting more and more attention from the world of criticism. The publication of her diaries, letters, biographies and collections of her essays has pushed the study on Woolf to a climax since 1970s. Literary criticism on Woolf has been made from various angles, while the study from the angle of painting has been largely ignored. This book is aimed at analyzing Woolf's innovatory novels from the angle of painting with an attempt to explore the ways in which she has combined the art of writing with that of painting in her novels to achieve the aesthetic effect of an organic whole.

Modernism emerged first in the field of visual art as early as in late 19th century with the appearance of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. These two schools are innovatory in that they have freed themselves from the traditionally dominant subject, using colour and form to convey the artists' concept about life. With these two movements spreading throughout Europe, Britain was undoubtedly under their influence and British literature began its process of Modernism from then on. Modern novelists, with Virginia Woolf the most outstanding of them, have patterned their literary experiments on parallels drawn from visual arts. Virginia Woolf herself says that "now undoubtedly we

are under the dominion of painting.”

Being the center of the Bloomsbury Group which is mainly composed of writers, artists and art critics who share a common interest in art, Virginia Woolf has always been considering the possibility of marrying the art of writing to the art of painting, for she always envies her sister Vanessa Bell as a painter who uses lines and colours freely. Roger Fry, a painter and art critic of the Bloomsbury Group, believes that the effort of combining these two arts is possible and significant. In his opinion, the tedious structure of the conventional novels in the 19th century lacks aesthetic effect of an organic whole. If this idea has stimulated Virginia Woolf's innovations in her novel writing, Post-Impressionists' paintings introduced by Roger Fry into Britain must have suggested to her the direction she will go. Under Roger Fry's influence, Clive Bell, Vanessa's husband, makes a close study on Post-Impressionists which has resulted in his book *Art* in 1913. In this book he puts forward his aesthetic hypothesis of "Significant Form" as the quality common to all visual arts. This hypothesis is based on Bell's summary of the characteristics of Post-Impressionists. As Bell sees it, what the Post-Impressionists have done is to convey their aesthetic emotion through the pure form they have created. This form is achieved through the processes of simplification and design, the former referring to the elimination of representative elements while the latter referring to the arrangement of the simplified form into a significant whole. Under the influence of Bell's theory, Virginia tries to borrow the principles of modern painting into her novel writing. This

influence can be seen clearly in her writing manifesto in "Modern Fiction". In this essay, she insists on novelists' deviation from the tradition by advocating that what modern novelists should do is to throw away the representative details of life and record instead the varying and unknown spirit. This is what she has done in her innovatory novels which start from *Jacob's Room*.

Considering the similarities between Woolf's novels and the Post-Impressionists' paintings, I think it convenient for me to use Clive Bell's hypothesis to make a study on Woolf's novels to see how Virginia Woolf has succeeded in combining these two arts together.

This book is written from three aspects according to Bell's hypothesis—simplification, form (lines and colours) and significant design, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* have been chosen as the objects of this study because these three are sufficient for the revelation of the development of Woolf's skill and vision in these continuous innovations.

In Chapter One, the manifestation of simplification in each of the three novels will be analyzed. Simplification for Woolf means what she has chosen as the materials of her novels. According to her understanding of life and reality, she has chosen moments of impressions to write about because, as she sees it, life is composed of impressions received at a moment by the mind and the illumination of each moment reveals the meaning of life behind chaos and disorder. Choice of moments is common to all the three novels by which the author conveys her conception of the world, life, death, isolation, etc. But the degree of simplification as well as

the narrative method determines the different aesthetic effects of them each. In *Jacob's Room*, the moments are chosen from the life span of Jacob and connected in a random way. The loose structure weakens the effect of organic intensity and wholeness. In *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the moments are chosen within the structure of a single day. But the Proustian quality of these moments calls back moments from the depth of memory. By putting side by side the past and the present through the stream of consciousness, Woolf has succeeded in achieving the plastic effect of balance and harmony.

In Chapter Two, the pictorial moments of each novel will be analyzed to see the effect of Impressionistic paintings and Post-Impressionistic paintings. Painting and writing are combined at this point because both are concerned about the relationship between the various elements embraced in each moment, in painting the relationship between lines and colours, in writing the relationship between man and man, man and the world. *Jacob's Room* is written from the external perspective and the effect of each moment is impressionistic which is characterized by bright colours and elusive effect. In *Mrs Dalloway*, I compare each moment of consciousness evoked by the surroundings to a mass on the canvas, the consciousness being the unseparated unity of lines and colours. The overlapping of the past and the present thickens the colour of each moment, and in this way the effect of Post-Impressionistic painting is achieved. In *To the Lighthouse*, the influence of Post-Impressionism is clearer with the employment of such skills as multi-perspectives and grotesque to give prominence

to the stereoscopic effect and degree of simplification respectively.

In Chapter Three, whether the design of each novel is significant or not is analyzed one by one. In spite of the fact that the structure of *Jacob's Room* is loose with all the moments connected in a random way, the significance of this randomness lies in the fact that this narrative method coincides with the way in which we understand this world. What is more, *Jacob's Room* marks the beginning of Woolf's rebellion against tradition in her experiment of eliminating plot from the novel. In *Mrs Dalloway* the significance is manifested in the solid and intense structure which envelopes a span of 30 years within a single day. In this way an organic whole is achieved. The uniqueness of *To the Lighthouse* lies in the balance of the structure in which the author connects two parts of men's activities, first in the afternoon and then in the morning with a collapse of ten years symbolized by darkness of a night. Greater significance lies in the contrast between the permanent moment at dinner in Part One and the fleeting passage of ten years in Part Two. This contrast, which reveals the author's respect for human activities and contempt for the erosion of Nature and threatening of death, is symbolically represented through the contrast between the candle light at dinner and darkness outside in the night, and this contrast continues to exist between Part Two and Part Three which conveys the same aesthetic feeling.

In the part of Conclusion, after a brief survey about the plastic virtue in Virginia Woolf's novels, a comparison is made between Virginia Woolf and Vincent van Gogh to see how they have been

seeking perseveringly for innovatory form to express the inner truth of their mind. This spirit of seeking is the most outstanding characteristic of them both and it acts as the key for us to understand the uniqueness of Virginia Woolf as an innovator in modern British literature.

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Introduction

If Baudelaire is trustworthy when saying that “all the arts tend, if not to act as a substitute for each other, at least to supplement each other, by lending each other new strength and new resources”,¹ we can conclude that in Virginia Woolf’s novels, the most influential art is painting. As if she were continuing what Baudelaire has observed, she goes on to point out that the 20th century literature is under the influence of modern painting:

... literature has always been the most sociable and the most impressionable of them all; that sculpture influenced Greek literature, music Elizabethan; architecture the English of the eighteenth century, and now undoubtedly we are under the dominion of painting. Were all modern paintings to be destroyed, a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cezanne, Derain, and Picasso; he would be able to say with those books before him that painters of the highest originality and power must be covering canvas after canvas,

¹ David Dowling, *Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1985) I.

*squeezing tube after tube, in the room next door.*¹

The ancient parallel between literature and the visual arts—i. e. painting, sculpture, and architecture—is continued in the twentieth century and takes on a new look. As Glen Macleod points out, “Painters were the first to explore the revolutionary possibilities of Modernism, so that painting became the leading art form.”² No wonder modernist writers will pattern their literary experiments after modernist painters. Two successive modern artistic movements—Impressionism and Post-Impressionism³—initiated in France and their influence extended to the field of literature throughout Europe. Just like Marcel Proust, her contemporary French writer, Woolf’s innovatory writing will no

1 Virginia Woolf, *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1948) 173.

2 Michael Levenson, ed *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000) 195.

3 According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Impressionism is a major movement first in painting and later in music that developed chiefly in France during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Adherents sought to express the general tone or impression produced by a scene or idea, departing from the strong, direct structure and themes of the earlier Romantics or Realists. The most conspicuous characteristic of Impressionism was an attempt to depict objectively the fleeting moment of visual reality, usually in terms of pure light. The principle Impressionist painters were Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot.

Post-Impressionism is a movement in France that turned against Impressionism. The name was coined by the English art critic Roger Fry for the work of such late 19th century painters as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and others. The Post-Impressionists rejected the limited aim of Impressionism in favour of more ambitious expression and solid design, admitting their debt, however, to the pure, brilliant colours of Impressionism, its freedom from traditional subject matter, and its technique of defining form with short brushstrokes of broken colour.

doubt accept the pattern created by the artists of these movements.

Woolf's access to painting starts from her girlhood when her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, delighted the children with his talent for drawing by covering sheets "with penciled animals or cut creatures out of paper with magical precision".¹ The father's genius is inherited by Woolf's sister Vanessa Stephen who later became a painter and follower of Post-Impressionism. Under the influence of her sister, Virginia Woolf also practiced a little painting in 1904 which was praised by Vanessa as "showing a very remarkable feeling for line".²

Woolf's aesthetic view is cultivated ever since the Bloomsbury Group came into being in 1905, which was composed mainly of writers, artists and art critics with G.E. Moore as their spiritual leader. Moore's intuitionist moral theory, which stresses on "the pleasure of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects"³, gives direction to their thinking and behaviour. Art is considered to be indispensable to the life of a civilized man for it could "at any moment become a means to a state of mind of superlative excellence."⁴ As a result, talks of every Thursday

1 Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. 1 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982) 26.

2 David Dowling, *Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1985) 95.

3 Margaret Drabble, ed *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 165.

4 Boris Ford, ed *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973) 294.

evening at No 46 Gordon Square centered by the Stephen sisters are mainly concerned about beauty of pictures. Among these members who share the same interest in art, two of them—Roger Fry and Clive Bell—are most important in their influence on the formation of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic idea.

Roger Fry did not join the Bloomsbury Group until he introduced Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin to the English public by giving "The First Post-Impressionist Exhibition" in 1910. The stunning impact of this show marks the beginning of the British modernist movement and this great change was captured by Virginia Woolf when she wrote that "in or about December 1910 human character changed".¹ Since then, the soul-position of G.E. Moore within the Bloomsbury Group gave way to Roger Fry when Cézanne became the chief topic of talks at the Group gatherings.

Roger Fry's aesthetic ideas are expressed mainly in "An Essay in Aesthetics" (1909) where he intends to elucidate the nature of the graphic arts which will put them into some kind of relation with the other arts. As he sees it, "graphic arts are the expression of imaginative life rather than a copy of actual life",² and he justifies the imaginative life by saying that "the artist might if he chose to take a mystical attitude and declare that the fullness and

1 Sue Roe & Susan Sellers, ed *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001) 168.

2 Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920) 20.