

Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

Virginia Woolf is recognized as one of the great innovators of modern fiction. Her experiments with point of view and her use of stream of consciousness have influenced many writers that followed her. But one particularly interesting technique that does not seem to receive much attention is her use of "moments of being."

She first mentions moments of being in her essay, "A Sketch of the Past," which was to be the beginning of her memoirs. She begins with one of her earliest memories: a night in the nursery at St. Ives. She vividly recalls the way the blinds fluttered in the wind, the light coming through the window and the sound of the sea. She had a feeling of "lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow" (65). This memory is so strong that when she recalls those sensations they become more real for her than the present moment.

This observation leads her to wonder why some moments are so powerful and memorable--even if the events themselves are unimportant--that they can be vividly recalled while other events are easily forgotten. She concludes that there are two kinds of experiences: moments of being and non-being.

V. Woolf never explicitly defines what she means by "moments of being." Instead she provides examples of these moments and contrasts them with moments of what she calls "non-being." She describes the previous day as:

Above the average in 'being.' It was fine; I enjoyed writing these first pages . . . I walked over Mount Misery and along the river; and save that the tide was out, the country, which I notice very closely always, was coloured and shaded as I like--there were the willows, I remember, all plummy and soft green and purple against the blue. I also read Chaucer with pleasure; and began a book . . . which interested me. (70)

She experiences each of these acts intensely and with awareness. But she continues to say that these moments were embedded in more numerous moments of non-being. For example, she does not remember what she discussed with her husband over tea.

Moments of non-being appear to be moments that the individual is not consciously aware of even as she experiences them. She notes that people perform routine tasks such as walking and shopping without thinking about them. This part of the life is "not lived consciously," but instead is embedded in "a kind of nondescript cotton wool" (70).

It is not the nature of the actions that separates moments of being from moments of non-being. One activity is not intrinsically more mundane or more extraordinary than the other. **Instead, it is the intensity of feeling, one's consciousness of the experience, that separates the two moments.** A walk in the country can easily be hidden behind the cotton wool for one person, but for Woolf the experience is very vivid.

Woolf asserts that these moments of being, these flashes of awareness, reveal a pattern hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life, and that we, "I mean all human beings--are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art." But the individual artist is not important in this work. Instead she says of all people, **"We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself"** (72).

Thus for Woolf a moment of being is a moment when an individual is fully conscious of his experience, a moment when he is not only aware of himself but catches a glimpse of his connection to a larger pattern hidden behind the opaque surface of daily life. Unlike moments of non-being, when the individual lives and acts without awareness, performing acts as if asleep, the moment of being opens up a hidden reality.

Moments of being can be found throughout Woolf's fiction. In this paper I will examine examples from her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*. **These are often moments of intense power and beauty. Unlike Joyce's epiphanies, these moments do not lead to decisive revelations for her characters. But they provide moments of energy and awareness that allow the character who experiences them to see life more clearly and more fully, if only briefly.** And some of the characters try to share the vision that they glimpse, making the work of art that is life visible to others.

Mrs. Dalloway presents the two characters who are most receptive to moments of being in all of Woolf's fiction: Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Clarissa experiences her moments of being while in the middle of what appear to be trivial acts, **indicating that it is not the action, but her awareness that sets a moment of being apart from her other experiences.** For example, as Clarissa watches taxi cabs pass by she finds them "absolutely absorbing.

" Her thoughts reveal that "what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her, the fat lady in the cab . . . Did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely . . . or did it not become consoling to believe that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived," (9).

Throughout the day Clarissa is particularly aware of these threads of connection between herself and her surroundings.

Later in the day Clarissa walks into Miss Pym's flower shop, closes her eyes and smells the flowers. She opens her eyes, and in a single remarkable sentence she thinks:

How fresh like frilled linen clean from a laundry laid in wicker trays the roses looked; and dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale--as if it were the evening and girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer's day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations its arum lilies was over; and it was the moment between six and seven when every flower--roses, carnations, irises, lilac--glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds . . .(13)

The breathless nature of this single line indicates Clarissa's intensity. Images are not neatly arranged, but spill forth unstoppable as one image leads to another and another. **Because moments of being are immediate, they often do not allow a character to reflect or assign meaning to them.**

Septimus Warren Smith experiences similar intense moments of vision. As he sits on a park bench and looks at the trees he feels:

Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight upon his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies', so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly would have sent him mad. (22)

As he continues to sit on the bench, he recognizes a connection between himself and the natural world:

"They beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made the statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern," (22).

It is true that he suffers from shell-shock, but his delusions do not prevent him from experiencing moments of exquisite awareness. Indeed they seem to make him more receptive to the facts of the natural world that most people fail to see. And this awareness does not appear particularly crazy or delusional when compared to Clarissa's own fascination with the physical world around her ("the fat lady in the cab").

When Clarissa hears of Septimus's death, she is able to clearly and accurately imagine how he committed suicide without being told, revealing their link in the larger pattern. She understands, in a moment of empathy, what Septimus's final act means:

"Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death," (184).

But the focus of Clarissa's day is her upcoming party. The party is a way for her to reveal the pattern that she momentarily glimpses. For her a party is a creation like any other:

"She felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?" (122).

When the party succeeds and people are brought together, her world does become a work of art.

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This leads to an important observation about these moments: all of them, beginning with Woolf's own childhood memory, are marked by particularly vivid and powerful language. Because these are moments of exact feeling, the language used to convey them must naturally be precise and evocative; the form and content must be in perfect symmetry. It is true that in a novel long stretches of narrative can be cloaked in mundane language: not every scene is of equal value or must carry an equal weight. **But in her moments of being Woolf uses a language that approaches poetry.**

Indeed Jeanette Winterson says that **Woolf needs to be read and taught as a poet** because her **exactness** more closely resembles poetry than prose. Winterson continues:

"She has the cardinal virtue of critical courage, sifting her ideas and her impressions through a fine riddle of words, and the clumsiness and the uncertainties drop away, leaving her with word and thing, rare and rich," (77).

This **clarity is precisely what Woolf achieves in a moment of being.** For Woolf **the significance of moments of being is this: they reveal to the individual who experiences them the pattern behind the woolly curtain of existence; and the existence of a pattern reveals the possibility of connection to other people.** When the cotton wool is rent, **when one experiences a moment with full consciousness,** one experiences **the true intensity of life. These moments of being can be read as brief poems hidden among the trivial details of life that some characters--and readers with them--are fortunate enough to experience.**

(Adapted from <http://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/matrix/urquhart.htm>)