

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Function of Art in the Mark on the Wall

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Abstract:

Virginia Woolf was both an author and a critic, in the latter field she was and is known as a feminist. In her novels the protagonist is almost always a woman. Yet this part of Woolf's career is not directly related to this study. This article of hers which is a discussion about literature is itself a work of art. While talking about literature her mind flows through ideas as the stream of consciousness she used in her novels. Accordingly scrutinizing such a work in order to get to the deeper levels of her article to find out more about literature and the view point about literature toward literature at her period could depict more about literature and also about Virginia Woolf herself. This process will be done through a vigorous study of Virginia Woolf and common beliefs on literature and then they will be matched together in order to find a meaning out of it.

1. Introduction

When I read the short piece of writing by Virginia Woolf called 'the mark on the wall' I became so interested in it; I guess it contained something that grabbed my attention. I liked it so much I even translated it. But when I started to search for it in the internet I almost found nothing; there was no paper on it and I thought it's a powerful work especially in defining literature. So I read a couple of books and tried to relate the pertinent parts to it. I looked through the first chapter of Terry Eagleton's 'literary theory' and did a research on Aristotle for he was the first who had concentrated on literature as an art not as a way to deceive people or teach them moral values. Then I looked through some of my books which had parts regarding Virginia Woolf's writings. And I have also searched a bit about the definition of literature itself in books to see what other people have defined as literature. It was a pleasing journey. And then I somehow in a classified way discussed those theories and in places if relevant put an example of the Woolf's work.

2. Discussion

Aristotle says "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability and necessity"; interestingly this sentence is the core ideology in Virginia Woolf's "The mark on the wall". The text that I cannot call short story for it's not a short story but a stream of thoughts that goes on in Woolf's mind while she's looking at a mark on her wall is discussing "what could that mark be". The text is not a short story but we can't call it an essay either for essays discuss something serious and in the light of reason while short stories have characters and a happening, while in this work Woolf is sitting calmly on her couch, looking at the mark on the wall and writing about literature. She is beautifully putting out this idea of the function of art when she declares that she doesn't want to stand up and find out what that is and instead she prefers to imagine about it, she is perfectly defining literature. It is funny, though it doesn't have any character, except for her and the mark; she is using the element of story which has turned out just fine.

Another element of literature that is prominent in this and other works of Woolf is her use of stream of consciousness; while she's looking at the mark her mind goes off to other facts from politics to social ceremonies. She is one of the pioneers of this and she has worked on it professionally. It is amazing that sometimes in her work she asks 'where was I? what I was talking about?' "What has it all been about? A tree? A river? The Downs? Whitaker's Almanack? The fields of asphodel? I can't remember a thing." I have not seen another writer who does that and that's the element of a powerful work.

Abrams defines literature as *belle lettres* which designates fictional and imaginative writings – poetry, prose fiction and drama. While Eagleton brings up the question that "if literature is creative or imaginative writing, does this imply that history, philosophy and natural science are uncreative or unimaginative?"

He continues "perhaps one needs a different kind of approach altogether. Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or imaginative but if it uses language in peculiar ways. On this theory literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian Critic Roman Jakobson, 'represents an organized violence committed on ordinary speech'. Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech." On a related note another Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky coins a feature of literariness as 'defamiliarization' or 'estrangement' "making strange the familiar"; he believes that by putting the ordinary to a new light one could make the audience distance from and react towards it. They believe that it is one of the functions of literature to awaken us from the state of oblivion. In the mark on the wall there are many instances of defamiliarization like when she says "How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom." She is stating the condition of our lives in a different perspective in order to say it is

not that real at all. And also to shake and tell us how things that we are concerning so seriously are not important at all and that these things are making our worlds so small.

Eagleton says in a part of his book “Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them”. He believes that literature is not what has been written on a paper but how one reads it; this idea is also somehow related to David Hume’s “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” even if you look at a train schedule and read it poetically it becomes a poem these days. Eagleton continues “What matters may not be where you come from but how people treat you. If you decide that you are literature then it seems that you are, irrespective of what people thought you were”. By this sentence he also puts the decision on the writing itself; I figure today’s literature is more pertinent to this idea but the poetry of 17th and 18th century and before paid so much attention to its diction and highness. Of course there is a rejection of this idea that says if people talked like that in earlier centuries what they wrote wouldn’t be so high and mighty for them just as our kind of literature might become so highly valued in 3 or 4 hundred years.

Now what is good literature? “The term ‘fine writing’ or *belles lettres*, is in this sense ambiguous: it denotes a sort of writing which is generally highly regarded, while not necessarily committing you to the opinion that a particular specimen of it is ‘good’. Value – judgments would certainly seem to have a lot to do with what is judged as literature and what isn’t – not necessarily in the sense that a piece of writing has to be fine to be literary, but that it has to be *of the kind* that is judged fine. With this reservation, the suggestion that ‘literature’ is a highly valued kind of writing is an illuminating one. But it has one fairly devastating consequence. It means that we can drop once and for all the illusion that the category ‘literature’ is ‘objective’, in the sense of being eternally given and immutable. Anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature – Shakespeare for example – can cease to be literature”. Subjectivity is the key point to this theory; in a way when you say that absolutely anything can be literature you are devaluing the works of authors who are talented and hardworking and are making beautiful pieces literarily and giving the freedom to the reader to find a train schedule literature, I think that is one of the downgrades of subjectivity.

“All literary works are ‘rewritten’, if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed, there is no reading of a work which is not a rewriting.” For instance, my reading of Woolf’s the mark on the wall is different from an English person in the time of its publication. When she talks about ‘Whitaker’s Table of Precedency’ I remember the rules of my own country; there are places in the story that I might identify myself with it in a way that an English or any other person wouldn’t. And I find it the beauty of literature, you cannot sympathize with a science book but you can with a novel.

3. Conclusion

So we can claim that we see sparks of literariness in ‘the mark on the wall’ for it shows us how literature talks about what may happen and is not stating a fact. It is full of allusions and it uses the prominent element of the 20th century literature ‘the stream of consciousness’. When we read it we sympathize with it, we can see our own daily life in it, how we think about mundane things and how these things have become so important in our lives. Actually the mark resembles a dark hole in our minds that we don’t see through it. And it depicts how subjective art can be while one gets one impression from it and another one, another.

4. References

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