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Altered Recurrence in *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf, in her novel *To the Lighthouse*, portrays memory progressing in a spiral motion. In this motion, a single memory, event, or moment in time, is captured and relived. These memories are initiated by present events similar to past experiences. Therefore, memories are a series of reoccurring events on a personal timeline that are altered slightly with each reconstruction, an experience that I will refer to as altered recurrence. Through altered recurrence, Woolf depicts art as a result of the creator's memory; yet, this pattern of memory also deems the work obsolete.

Woolf uses memory and the construction of the novel itself to indicate altered recurrence. Woolf uses reoccurring words and phrases that change as the novel progresses. Mr. Ramsey notes in "The Window" section that "the house was full," indicating it is full of life (38). The same words "house" and "full" are repeated when she said, "The house seemed full of children sleeping and Mrs. Ramsay listening" (49). However, at the end of "Time Passes," it is noted that "the house was full again" (142). By the ending of "Time Passes" the word "full" in association with the word "house" has changed for the reader. Therefore, when the reader reaches the end of "Time Passes," the word is remembered in association with the life of the family. The reader then compares the remembered usage to the usage in "Time Passes" and notices that the words "house" and "full" have, indeed, changed. The words "house" and "full" have become associated with emptiness, since they were first associated with the life of individuals that are no longer present. By repeating words and phrases, Woolf emphasizes that memory of the past combines with a present experience to create new perceptions of words, events, and reality.

Woolf also places importance not only on the memory of the reader, but on characters experiencing specific, reoccurring events. In the first section of this novel, Mr. Ramsay repeats

that James will not be able to go to the lighthouse. When looking at James, Mrs. Ramsay is “certain that he [James] was thinking, we are not going to the lighthouse tomorrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life” (62). This remark is important in that it depicts and predicts the power of memory, and the ability for this single event to influence a future one. For at the end of the novel, James remembers: “Something, he remembered, stayed and darkened over him; would not move...smiting through the leaves and flowers even of that happy world and making it shrivel and fall.” The lines that immediately follow this are “‘it will rain,’ he remembered his father saying. ‘You won’t be able to go to the Lighthouse’” (186). Even as James recognizes that his rage is not necessarily against his father, but born out of the need to resist his father’s will, James cannot forget the moment his father terminated the voyage to the lighthouse. This singular moment in the past still affects how James sees the present, as he tries to come to terms with anger and resentment against his father. James demonstrates that memory of a past event that is similar to a current one changes one’s perspective, essentially combining the two experiences to create a new perspective of the present.

The single, most important character in regards to memory and reoccurrence is Lily. Lily is present in the beginning of this novel and at its conclusion. She starts to paint a picture in “The Window” but never finishes as she intended. In “The Lighthouse” she realizes “she had never finished that picture,” and “she would paint that picture now” (147). Once she sets up her easel she notes “it must have been precisely here that she had stood ten years ago” (147). Lily’s current experience is almost mirroring her past experience, nearly ten years prior. The difference is that she begins and ends her painting. As she is painting “she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related” (158). “Rhythm,” in art, as described in *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*, occurs

“if particular parts are recalled in a rhythmical way” so that “a work will be seen together” (Ocvirk 24). Rhythm “may be simple, as when it repeats only one type of measure” or “it may be composite of two or more recurring measures that exist simultaneously.” The final type of rhythm is a “complex variation which recalls a particular accent in a usual way” (Ocvirk 24). However, all forms of rhythm are the same in that they display “a flow, which is affected by reiterating and measuring related, similar or equal parts. It is recurrence, a measure, such as meter, tempo or beat” (Ocvirk 24). The rhythm in art creates patterns and reoccurring parts to form one unified piece. Lily later says that her brush had “fallen in with some rhythm which dictated her” (Woolf 159). Through the description of painting, Woolf mimics the pattern of altered recurrence with the reoccurring patterns that create rhythm in art. By painting in a rhythm, Lily physically demonstrates the pattern of altered recurrence to create one single piece of art, or one perspective.

In finding this rhythm or pattern of altered recurrence, Lily recreates, in her mind, a scene, a memory, of Mrs. Ramsay on the beach. She uses this memory, “which survived, after all these years complete,” to “re-fashion her memory” of Charles Tansley, which remains “in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art” (160). She then again mentions the scene of Mrs. Ramsey on the beach. Lily retells the story, quoting Mrs. Ramsey saying, “Is it a boat? Is it a cork?” and in the very beginning of the next paragraph, she retells with Mrs. Ramsey asking, “Is it a boat? Is it a cask” (171). Not only is the situation retold again by Lily, relived in her mind, but Mrs. Ramsay’s quote occurs twice but with a changed line in the second telling. The word “cork” is changed to “cask,” though the two instances are nearly replicas of one another. This gives a sense of recurrence with only slight change in the re-experience of the situation.

Through the rhythm and memory of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily looks to her painting and feels an “obscure distress.” Her intention was to finish the painting she once started with the correction of the unbalanced masses. However, she feels she cannot “achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces,” the problem she believed she solved when she began the painting. Then reflecting on what she wants, she realizes she wants “the thing itself before it has been made anything. Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh” (193). Lily begins to solve her problem with the painting, only to find herself ending with the same problem. This duplicates the looped pattern of altered recurrence. The time that passes from Lily beginning and concluding has altered her perspective of the problem. The same problem she saw before, she now sees differently. She asks, “What was the problem then?” (193) By concluding with the same problem, Lily has combined the memory of the past problem with the current to change her perspective of the problem. She seems to understand altered recurrence by repeating the phrase, “Get that and start afresh.” One perspective changes to form another perspective, as if starting afresh. This recognition of altered recurrence pushes Lily toward her final vision.

Reoccurring events and memories push Lily to create her painting and assure her that the painting is complete. Lily reflects on Mrs. Ramsay, and her reflections lead her to a conclusion that describes altered recurrence. Lily says, “One had constantly a sense of repetition of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations” (199). This directly addresses the argument in favor of time progressing in the shape of loops or spirals. Woolf depicts memory as the catalyst for altered recurrence, as past events affect the perspective of the present.

Lily’s final step toward her “vision” recognizes art as the creation of altered recurrence but also renders the work dated by the same principle. Lily imagines Mrs. Ramsay on the porch,

when a person at a window appears and settles “by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. It altered the composition of the picture a little. It was interesting. It might be useful.” She notes, “One must keep on looking without for a second of relaxing the intensity of emotion” and “One must hold the scene-so-in a vise and let nothing come in and spoil it” (201). After this thought she dips her brush into her paint and says, “The problem might be solved after all. Ah, but what happened?” (202) The person at the window “altered the composition of the picture a little.” The memory was changed “a little” and Lily uses this change, combines it with her memory of Mrs. Ramsay sitting on the porch, and creates a new composition. By combining the new experience with the old memory, she is able to dip her paint brush into her paint. Altered recurrence leads Lily toward her final vision and enables her to construct her painting.

However, in recognizing altered recurrence, Lily also acknowledges that her new perspective is also vulnerable to change. This is why one must “hold the scene-so-in a vise and let nothing come in and spoil it.” Knowing that her perspective is able to shift, Lily tries to hold and paint her understanding of the moment. Therefore, Lily’s painting is a product of a reoccurring memory. Once the painting is finished, the artist’s perspective will change through altered recurrence, rendering the perspective depicted in the painting obsolete.

At the end of the novel she states, “It [her painting] would be hung in the attics” or “it would be destroyed” (208). Thomas Lewis, in “Virginia Woolf’s Sense of the Past,” argues that Woolf used the novel to come to terms with her past, by using characters to represent family members. This is applicable to the extent that he emphasizes Lily as a reflection of Woolf. Lewis says, “The line Lily draws” to complete her painting is a “diagonal one connecting the background and foreground of her painting, her past with her present” (192). Lily’s disregard for

the painting's destruction arises from her "own private satisfaction" of bringing "order to the various sensations she has had about the world as it was ten years earlier" (Woolf 192). The painting is a representation of the assimilation of a past experience with a present experience and the satisfaction of combining the two for a new perspective. The destruction of Lily's art is not important because it becomes outdated through altered recurrence, and is simply a tool to help the artist understand a fresh perspective. Art is created through altered recurrence, but the same work becomes irrelevant to the artist once the work is completed. The artist is satisfied to paint because he develops a new understanding by the motion, not because the product has the possibility of monetary profit.

The effect of altered recurrence on art is emphasized by Lily's final product and statement. She declares, "I have had my vision." The use of present perfect indicates an action that may still have influence on the present (209). Lily's experience of clarity with "sudden intensity" will now affect how she sees any similar event in the future. However, the use of the present perfect tense indicates an action that recently ended. Not only is this event ended and forever marked as a moment in time that can physically never be repeated, it will forever have influence on an individual in a future situation that is similar. Through Lily's vision and experiences with memory, Woolf portrays the influence of singular events of the past on present events, both in the perspective of the individual and the relevance of art.

For the reader, this novel is now accessible in memory and will alter a future event that is considered similar in some manner to the experience had with this novel; similarly, one that reads through the novel again will find it changed from the previous experience. Readers remember moments in which they are impacted. When reading through a novel a second time, the reader will remember those moments and combine them with a present reading of the novel

to create a fresh perspective. For instance, after an individual reads the novel, the title itself has changed meaning. The words no longer signify a trip to a lighthouse, but a journey of understanding and comprehension through the passing of time. Woolf intentionally places the lighthouse at both the beginning and end of the novel to immediately force the reader to recognize a changed perspective of the title. Woolf actively compels the reader to recognize the use of altered recurrence in both the characters and the reader himself, reinforcing the effect of memory on perspective.

Though Woolf has been closely associated with Freud, her use of memory embodies the theories of Frederic Bartlett. Though, it is likely her work was not impacted by his studies. Bartlett, a British psychologist who later became the director of the Cambridge Psychological Laboratory, began researching memory in May 1913. He published his experiment findings in 1932. In his publication, *Remembering*, Bartlett says memory is “built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience” (213). Memory is built on previous experiences with a combination of factual details, personal values, and previous reactions. Bartlett’s research viewed the consciousness and memory in parts, rather than in a whole. Bartlett addressed the work of Freud, describing Freud’s work as “a source of much confusion in psychological argument and experiment” (15). He describes Freud as “developing the view that memories form a static mass, the concern of a system all their own, utterly uncontaminated with perceptual functions, and brought into relation with these by an elaborate mechanism, the exact working of which it is hard to understand and to credit” (15). Though Bartlett doesn’t completely agree with Freud and finds his arguments confusing and unfounded, Bartlett does note that Freud recognizes the importance of history and previous events. The key difference, however, is Freud’s disregard for the importance of perception during events. Bartlett

states, “In order to understand how and what we remember, we must set into relation to this how and what we perceive” (15). He parallels memory to psychology, noting that psychology is built from preceding experimentation. The process of remembering events and reliving past experiences fits the outline of Bartlett’s research and findings; although there is no concrete evidence of Woolf taking interest in Bartlett’s studies, Woolf’s depiction of memory coincidentally coincides with Frederic Bartlett leading the development of cognitive psychology.

Virginia Woolf’s novel depicts memory as a reconstruction of a past event, affecting a present experience, to create a new perspective. These perspectives are consistently built and changed, working in a spiral motion on a personal timeline. Due to this pattern, past experiences are only relevant in that they shape the present perspective. For artists, to capture a single moment is to capture a single perspective. Once the work is completed, the work is irrelevant to the artist and no longer depicts the perspective of the creator. Woolf emphasizes this with the reader. The perspective of the reader at the beginning of the book is changed when compared to the end of the book. The first perspective is only relevant in that it aids in shaping a current perspective. *To the Lighthouse* portrays the perspective of an individual created by a re-experience of the past, combined with an experience of the present, to create a single, evolved perspective; memory creates and renders obsolete.

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Annotated Bibliography

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Bartlett's work details his research in the field of cognitive psychology, specifically the process of remembrance. As for my essay, Virginia Woolf is closely associated with the work of Freud. I used this source to explore Bartlett's opinions of Freud. My essay argues that Woolf's work depicts remembrance as a spiral, which recycles past experiences to shape a present perspective. Bartlett's research supports this cyclical nature, and therefore, supports Woolf's depiction of remembrance. Though there is no physical connection between the lives of Woolf and Bartlett, the similarity of ideas cannot be ignored. The source also added depth in that it shows the dissimilarity between Freud and Woolf, even though these two individuals are closely associated with one another.

Lewis, Thomas S. W. "Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past." *The Literary Imagination and the Sense of the Past* 1985-1986: 186-205. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 Dec. 2013.

This article argues that Woolf's novel is closely associated with her own past. Lewis details specific events and individuals of Woolf's life and how both manifest in her work. I used this work to support the influence of the past on the present. To argue that Woolf's own past shaped the way in which she wrote her novel supports the portrayal of remembering as a spiral construct. By using this resource, the argument is elevated simply from the text and characters to the actual life of the writer. To provide information on the life of the writer, and use that information to reflect the concept of the novel, creates a powerful argument.

Ocvirk, Otto G. *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*. Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown Co., 1968. Print.

A major part of Woolf's portrayal of memory is the structure. Woolf presents memory as a series of loops that slowly move forward. This pattern creates rhythm, which she demonstrates through the process of rhythm of painting. In order to truly understand Woolf's concept, I had to understand rhythm within the realm of art. Rhythm is patterns in art that create a single, unified piece. The rhythm within painting mimics the rhythm of memory. This art concept is a fundamental part of Woolf's novel, as one of the dominant characters is an artist.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1981. Print.

Woolf's novel is the entire basis of the essay. Woolf uses various characters in varying professions to portray memory, and that the act of remembering draws from a pattern of reconstructing the past. The dominant ideas of the essay draw from Woolf's prose, which uses repeating images and phrases.