

## A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S FICTIONS: THE PROCESS OF SELF-FORMATION

Saghar Najafi

Ms., Shiraz University, IRAN, [Saghar.Najafi@yahoo.com](mailto:Saghar.Najafi@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

One of the most challenging issues in Woolf's novels is the notion of selfhood. It is obvious that she differentiates her autonomous self-conscious characters from those who suffer from mental illnesses and have fractured sense of self. Woolf tried to explain the nature of humanity, consciousness and selfhood through fundamental concepts of phenomenology, founded by Husserl, such as temporality, intentionality, displacements, intersubjectivity, epoché and categorial intention. These notions are the coral focus in Husserl's philosophy. Husserlian phenomenology is an attempt to clarify the structure of consciousness and sense of selfhood. In a comparative attempt to adapt Husserl's philosophy and Woolf's viewpoint of the world, it has been shown that Woolf's characters develop their senses of selfhood through the same characteristics. In three novels reviewed in this article, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf beautifully zeroed in on the importance of awareness of self-awareness as one of the most important criteria in defining who her characters are.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology, Selfhood, Consciousness, Sense of self.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology is one of the possible answers to epistemological questions. It is called the science of sciences; actually it was Husserl's preference to call it science rather than philosophy (Moran 4). In the very literal sense of the word phenomenology means the study of phenomenon and appearance. Apparently Husserl chose this word due to its inherent nature which refers to the structure of human experiences as they present themselves to consciousness (Dreyfus and Wrathall 16). Now the ultimate goal of phenomenology is to perceive bracketed reality, a presuppositionless or a pure perception of reality which is not possible without consciousness; so there is a mutual correspondence between these two notions.

Now why Woolf has been chosen as the target of this essay is because of her fascination with the nature of humanity. Hussey believed that there is an "implicit philosophical" concern behind Woolf's fictions (XI). Her characters are not just a figment of her imagination yet they are the ink and paper beings derived from Woolf's real life, memory, friends and family. Her characters can be viewed from a phenomenological aspect and secondly she, herself, can be viewed from the same perspective. The focus of this essay is the former one. But if Woolf's perspective on epistemological scale is considered, her omnipresence is undeniable in her novels. In Hussey's words Woolf "*wrote her life*" (XIII). Paradoxically she is both present and absent at the same time. She tried not to be yet her life and presence are intermingled into her plots.

The narrative form of her novels gives her characters the opportunity to get to know themselves. Though trivial, her characters mention every experience of the world in her novels; the most obvious of which would be *The Waves*. Susan reassures herself of her being as such: "But who I am, who lean on this gate and watch my setter nose in a circle? I think sometimes (I am not twenty yet) I am not a woman, but the light that

falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn" (683).

Woolf was also obsessed with the perception of reality and she did her best to sketch it in her novels; Alan Wilde calls this effort of hers "phenomenological" (148). "But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?" (*MBAMB* 10). Within each novel she tried to portray one aspect of reality. What mattered to her the most was the definition of reality viewed from each character's perspective. Her idea of consciousness in *Modern Fiction* attests my claim; "The mind receives myriad impressions- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from the old; the moment of importance came not here but there" (160). Tracing how characters' consciousnesses function leads the readers to a more profound knowledge of the novels and the characters with whom they identify themselves.

Woolf believed that "One's self is the greatest monster and miracle in the world" (qtd. In Hussey 101). And Hussey renders value to selfhood by saying that "The mystery of life seems intimately bound up with the mystery of self as an absolute, conclusive center" (101). Likewise her characters are the "interpreters of the world around" and "human identity becomes the central focus of her art" (Circosta 73, 118). Her efforts can be summed up in an "accommodation between consciousness and 'here and now'" (Wilde 142). This essay will explain how the agents of experience achieve senses of selfhood throughout the novels. She thought that experiences are formative.

Central to both phenomenology and Woolf is consciousness and central to consciousness is intentionality. Phenomenological intentionality must not be confused with the deliberate intentions we have every day; "Despite the practical overtone of the latter, the philosophical notion conveys a mental or cognitive content of this action" (Sokolowski 17). The best definition of intentionality, I believe, is offered by John Searle as following; It is a conscious and unconscious state which are directed at, about, or concerned with objects that are in the world which are independent of our minds. When I am conscious, I am conscious of something. Moran asserts that "All conscious experiences are characterized by aboutness" (16). Phenomenological consciousness can't exist in solitude as Cartesian consciousness could. It is always in the process of intending the reality. This suggests that Husserl was against the immanent notion of consciousness. Husserl believed that intentionality is one of the factors which indicated the mutual belonging of subjectivity and objectivity. Among interpreters' ideas Moran suggests that "the actual existence of the object is not necessary" (16). Husserl was positive that he could understand the mental pattern better if he could categorize intentional acts, which he called noesis, and the objects intended, which he called noema (Sokolowski 21).

Among the accounts given above there is one important omnipresent element which is self; an entity to whom everything is given. Self is being centralized here. This is Descartes's 'cogito ergo sum' modernized (Moran 16). Intentionality and consciousness of the agent are centralized. It is worth mentioning that Husserl claims what he theorizes is true for sane mature people (Ideas 56). For example these theories are not true for schizophrenics. Yet Sokolowski believes that even if a person perceives what is not out there she is referring to the outside world or she perceives a nonexistent object. He says that "nothing happens in the cabinet of the mind" (23). This characteristic underlies a crucial aspect of consciousness which enables us to form an apprehension of selfhood. Intentionality signifies what it means to be conscious of reality and primarily of oneself. Consciousness strives to be aware of its own awareness; this proposition is one of the biggest solipsistic traps phenomenology has ever fallen into and it hasn't been solved yet. Louis, in *The Waves*, states his concern as following: "Who are you? Who am I?- that quivers its uneasy air over us, and the pulse quickens and the eye brightens and all the insanity of personal existence without which life would fall flat and die, begins again" (747).

Woolf's characters lead a life through remembrance, perceptions and hopes. Those who are mentally healthy have a world to mind or mind to world fit. Regarding this case, Mrs. Dalloway would be a good

example. She remembers young Clarissa and her adventures or she constantly hopes that her party goes as well as she has planned. Her characters' attentions are forwarded toward the world and reversely they know themselves in virtue of these familiarities. Apart from these characters there are some personages whose perceptions do not correlate with the world outside. Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* does not have a mind to world or a world to mind fit. His perceptions, no matter what they are, represent Evans's death in the world outside (Circosta 46). "There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings" (*MD*, 142). He can't establish a direct mind to world relation and this may cause further mental breakdown. My perceptions, my beliefs, desires and other emotions bear significance as far as they relate to the external world.

The establishment of selfhood is possible this way. "There is a need, Peter feels, to make direct contact with the surface appearances of life, to assert the ego" (Naremore 1973 110); or like Bernard who believes that he has to "throw his mind out in the air as a man throws seeds in great fan-flights ... " (*TW* 740). Her characters have a strong bond with reality through which they affirm their own beings. Another example would be Rhoda whose external link to her perception is silence time to time. She brings her being, silence and nothingness on the same level; "But here I am nobody. I have no face" (*TW* 652); or her mental state does not match the outside appearance; in a reunion to see their friend, the silent character, Percival for the last time, Rhoda expresses her futuristic intention as such: "The tiger leaps" (*The Waves* 687). She goes on talking about an illusory tiger which is the displaced signifier for Rhoda's conscious intention on the future. Feeling the disaccord between her intentionality and reality, Rhoda is forced to act like Jinny and Susan; only this way she feels she is acting according to reality. She expresses her feeling as such: "Their world is the real world ... They know what to say if they are spoken to. They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it" (*The Waves* 657).

Fundamental to perception is presence and absence. Husserl enunciated that when he perceives an object he perceives it from the perspective he's looking at it. He doesn't perceive it in totality since there are aspects which are absent from his view. So in Husserl's ideas perception is always a combination of absences and presences, existence and non-existence. Husserl claims that "we experience objects in space one-sidedly. In order to experience them fully we have to have flux of experiences" or what he later calls stream of consciousness (qtd. In Dreyfus and Wrathall 96). This is also true about abstract concepts; as an example Sokolowski says that we understand someone speaking because it stands opposite to silence. On another level we understand what the sentence means because we understand what is *not* given in the sentence.

"The idea of *complete* expression is nonsensical ... all language is indirect or allusive- that is, if you wish, silence ... "silence is, then, the counterpart of language, in a sense its source; and its paradoxical presence has some resemblance to that of ... " (qtd. In Wilde 159). Being aware of this relation between language and silence, Woolf tried to make the best out of it. *To the Lighthouse* represents one of the best encounters of absence and presence. The penultimate absence forms itself in the shape of death; especially death of Mrs. Ramsay. Reality to the characters is presented by the absent side of the matters. The emblem of this phenomenon is represented by the "table" in the kitchen which has become the object of reflection of the philosopher, Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay questions the existence of the table in the absence of the observer. "He must have had his doubts about that table, she supposed; whether the table was a real table" (*TTL* 357). Whether or not the table really exists if there is an observer to perceive it made Mr. Ramsay think and "fix his eyes on the table" (*TTL* 357). This object of reflection turns into another target at the end of the novel i.e. the lighthouse. Reality presents itself in the absence of unreality (Banfield 62).

Later absence is incarnated in one of her characters called Percival whose tacit characteristic reinforces his absence among his friends. His "empty place" stroke Neville after he died (*TW* 768). Sokolowski claims that "Absence is a phenomenon and it must be given its due" (45). Consequently our experiences are the amalgamation of absence and presence. There is no possibility that an agent perceives an object in its totality; therefore our perceptions always lack some aspects of the objects perceived. There is an ever-present lack existing in our perceptions of the world. Husserl also maintained that "the possibility of the non-

being of the world is never excluded" (qtd. In Wrathall and Dreyfus 97). Only through absence we can lay out the system of name calling and conceive the identities of objects.

After writing *Logical Investigations (1900-1901)*, Husserl figured out that "his treatment of ego was inadequate" (Moran 77). He introduced temporality "which unifies conscious acts" (Moran 77). The temporal nature of consciousness gives human beings a coherent sense of selfhood and this made his account of selfhood relatively complete. Time causes a "synthesis of identity" which causes the continuity of an identity. It relates recollection, perception and anticipation together and this causes an agent to have a stable understanding of her selfhood. What Husserl called temporality is basically the inner time-consciousness. There are three levels of temporality: objective time, subjective or immanent time and consciousness of internal time. The first one is the time on the calendar or clock; i.e. the universal agreement of the division of the parts of a day into units of time. The second one is the "individual way of telling time" (Circosta 124). It refers to our experiences of the world and its revival through memory. It signifies the "duration and sequence of the mental acts and experiences, the events of conscious life" (Sokolowski 130). Sokolowski claims that the first and second levels are interdependent since it is an agent's experience of the subjective time that objective time becomes meaningful (132).

The third level, which is the center of focus in phenomenology, refers to the awareness of the subjective time; that is to say, the awareness of self-awareness. It works as a flow or what is famously called stream of consciousness. In order to understand how the first two levels work, the existence of the third level is indispensable. Husserl calls it the "absolute subjectivity" (Ideas 190). This level is the basic structure of ego-formation. When an ego is aware of its perceptions, memories, anticipation and also of an objective time, it is in the process of being formed.

Reading Woolf's fiction gives the impression that the majority of the pages are dedicated to the remembrance of the things past by an agent whose selfhood is formed through the reminiscences; their consciousnesses are engaged with the abundant phenomena happened before. She strongly believed in the "[c]ontinued existence of the past" (Hussey 116). Woolf believed in the temporal nature of human identity (Circosta 118). She reveals deep selfhood and individuality by interconnecting the present moments of characters and their stream of consciousnesses (Circosta 152). The problem, which is the loss of a sense of selfhood, usually arises with the incompetency to realize the difference between subjective time, the second level of temporality, and the awareness of subjective time, the third level of temporality. Otherwise there would be a stable identity. A synthesis among the first and the other two levels would result in a stable unified ego.

The objective time is shown in the sound of Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*; from time to time it reminded the characters, always daydreaming and thinking, of an order; or of the parts of a day. The subjective mode is mostly represented by Clarissa and Peter's thinking about the days of the past; the ways they perceive time in these cases are different from others. Clarissa has a healthy, full functioning ego; during the narration, Clarissa is going through her memories with Peter and Sally while, at the same time, she is fully aware of herself as remembering something; this awareness lets her swing back and forth between the present moment and the past which provides her with a strong ego capable of displacement. Jean Guiget, apparently, has the same idea about the "displacement of the self?": "To exist, for Virginia Woolf, meant experiencing that dizziness on the ridge between two abysses of the unknown, the self and the non-self" (qtd. In Goldman 129-130). Brough claims that the second level of temporal consciousness allows for enrichment, like Clarissa's changing attitude from living in Bourton until marrying Richard and living in London, while the third level of consciousness "ensures that the self will not be dispersed in these acts", which is proved by the stable identity Clarissa holds to from Bourton years to London years (qtd. In Circosta 127).

If a person lives in the moment, i.e. the only thing perceived is the present moment; she would have a truncated sense of selfhood. To them the present moment oscillates between "no longer" and "not yet" (Circosta 132). Circosta also believes that when internal time is disrupted, psychosis happens (127). In the

case of Septimus Smith psychosis takes place; because of war his internal time consciousness is ruptured and he is just able to focus on the past. The present loses its significance to him because what he can perceive is the war memories. Rhoda suffers from the same thing too. Rhoda does not have any healthy perception of temporality. Her perception is fragmented. Circosta suggested that Rhoda's perception of time "leaps rather than flows" (129); "Sailors loiter on the parade, and the amorous couples; the omnibuses rattle along the sea front to the town. I will give; I will enrich" (*TW* 664). Rhoda lives at the moment; it does not have any continuity through time. In *The Waves*, when the children are going back home for summer vacation from school, sitting in the train, they describe their perceptions of the scenery outside; while everybody is giving a comprehensible account of their perceptions, Rhoda describes her perceptions as such: "And now, as the train passes by these red rocks, by this blue sea, the term, done with, forms into one shape behind me. I see its colour. June was white. I see the fields white with daisies, and white with dresses; the tennis courts marked with white. Then there was wind and violent thunder..." (667). Her perception leaps from one moment to another.

Rhoda can't link her perceptions together; in describing sceneries, she talks about rocks, months, tennis courts, daisies which aren't related logically. Rhoda definitely has a self but it is fractured. Zahavi in his book *subjectivity and selfhood*, claims that if a person is aware of her own consciousness, she has a specific perspective of her own. In Woolf's narration it seems that Rhoda is aware of herself yet is unable to reconcile different levels of temporality; is it possible that an agent be aware of her unawareness of different levels of consciousness? This paradoxical question implies awareness. Rhoda is always reminding the reader that she has "no face" (652). She believes that her selfhood is "insubstantial", in Circosta's word (131). In one the passages in *The Waves*, Rhoda declares her banishment from the circle of temporality: "Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join-so- and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside it, crying, "Oh save me, from being blown ever outside the loop of time!" (646). Obviously she has a sense of selfhood but the fragmented sense of selfhood wouldn't let her function normally in the society. This may be the cause of her suicide.

Selfhood is still remained a vague issue. Its complexity is beyond any explanations. If theoreticians could reduce selfhood to one statement, any further humanitarian studies would be absurd. Haraway does not believe that "a final authoritative theory of the subject is neither possible nor desirable" (176). Furthermore Roderick believes that fortunately it is what humanity lacks (lecture 7). I believe what stirs human beings into finding out who they are begin when they understand their infinitesimal place in relation to the universe. It is the starting point of discovering what their roles are and how their consciousnesses could possibly define the vast universe around them. Understanding their views of the world results in self-recognition too. In Haraway's words "The schools of thought through history mark human efforts in "maximization of its self-consciousness" (177).

This article mostly reflected on the temporal and intentional aspects of self-formation from phenomenological point of view. Although phenomenological account of selfhood includes lots of features in the presence of which a wholesome sense of selfhood would be achieved, the space of this article does not allow me to include all that. So I analyzed characters from these two perspectives. The significance of self in the phenomenological explanation of consciousness is articulated by Husserl as following: "in phenomenological reflection, one is aware not just of the unity of consciousness, but of a unifier. "The idea of the pure ego involves that of agency" (qtd. In Wrathall and Dreyfus 99). Self is a "dative of manifestation" here which means that it is the basic element in perceiving the reality (Sokolowski 45). He considers selfhood as a substance working as an agent in unifying our consciousnesses. It is obvious that despite phenomenology's efforts to liberate its account of awareness of self-awareness from infinite regress, it did not succeed that much. In Wilde's words there is a world out there "to be transformed and tamed by the ultimate subjectivity that is the self" (141). Zahavi explains subjectivity in the form of experiencing. He believes that an experience must possess an agent. So he concludes that every experience indicates an agent's subjectivity (2003 88).

Now according to Hawthorn Woolf believed that “identity is defined, in part, by a nucleus of uniqueness, by an ‘irreducible core [...], which exists independently of other people’ (Clair 172). As a consequence, tracing each character’s line of thinking results in a nearly defined selfhood. Applying philosophy, in this case phenomenology does not signify using literature as a means to justify some ideas of philosophy. It is a way of revealing the writer’s point of view of the world. Of course phenomenology is not the one and the only way to recognize Woolf’s world view. Sokolowski believes that it would be “bigotry” if we confine ourselves to one idea or a school of philosophy (25). Defining the consciousness of somebody is the core idea of phenomenology and defining selfhood is what we think of ourselves; what ideas we have of ourselves (Circosta 190). And it is “the power of disclosure; our power of being the dative of manifestation which lead us to a life of reason” (Sokolowski 121); likewise some of Woolf’s characters merit from a life of reason and others don’t. What has been given above about characters depicts a partial attempt to show how Woolf tried to make her characters as life-like as possible.

## REFERENCE LIST

Banfield, Ann. “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and CambridgeTime.” *Poetics Today* 24.3 (2003): 471-516.

Burkitt, Ian. *Social Selves: Theories of Self and Society*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Sage, 2008.

Circosta, Jo Ann. *Witness to Consciousness: Virginia Woolf and Phenomenology*. Diss. University of Kentucky, 2006. ProQuest: 3259103, 2008.

Deryfus, Hubert L., and Mark A. Wrathall, eds. *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Malden: Blackwell, 2006.

Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. London: Allen & Unwin, 1931.

\_\_\_ *Logical Investigation*. Trans. J.N.Findlay. London & New York: Routledge, 1913.

Hussey, Mark. *The Singing of the Real World*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986.

Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000.

Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Naremore, James. “A World without a Self: The Novels of Virginia Woolf.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 5.2 (1972): 122-134.

\_\_\_ *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*. USA: Yale University Press, 1973.

Parsons, Deborah. “Trauma and War Memory”. *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*. Eds. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 175-197.

Porter, Roy. *Rewriting the Self*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Saunders, Rebecca. “Language, Subject, Self: Reading the Style of *To the Lighthouse*.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 26.2 (1993): 192-213.

Sokolowski, Robert. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Wang, Ban. “I on the Run: Crisis of Identity in *Mrs. Dalloway*.” *MFS* 38.1 (1992): 177-191.

Wilde, Alan. “Virginia Woolf and the Prose of the World.” *Philosophical Approaches to Literature*. Ed. William E. Cain. London and Toronto: Bucknell University Press, 1984. 140-164. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *Jacob's Room*. London: Wordsworth, 2005.

\_\_\_ *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Wordsworth, 2005.

\_\_\_ *To the Lighthouse*. London: Wordsworth, 2005..

\_\_\_ *The Waves*. London: Wordsworth, 2005.

\_\_\_ *Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown*. London: Hogarth Press, 1924.

\_\_\_ "Modern Fiction." *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. London: The Hogarth Press, 1984. Vol 4:157-164.

Zahavi, Dan. *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First Person Perspective*. England: MIT Press, 2005.

\_\_\_ *Husserl's Phenomenology*. California: Stanford, 2003.

\_\_\_ "Is the Self the Social Construct?" *Inquiry* 52.6 (2009): 551-573.