

Spatial form in modern literature seen through Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract

The article discusses the American literary scholar, Joseph Frank's concept of the "spatialization of form"- a literary instrument that asseverates the preponderant role played by space as regards temporal depiction in a narrative-by dint of an illustration viz. the modernist novel, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* wherein the narratorial depiction of the act of an aeroplane skywriting over London streets concomitant to the narratorial depiction of the journey of the official car of the Queen of England moving about London streets functions as an effectual structural device enabling the narrative to showcase to the readers multifarious scenes exteriorizing simultaneously in time and space together with allowing it to evince the ripostes of diverse characters who are all reacting differently but at the same time to the same scene transpiring in front of their eyes and to interlock the lives of these characters located in disparate space and physical loci. Frank's "spatialization of form" materializes in an enormously conspicuous instance in the aforementioned scene in the modernist novel.

Keywords: "Spatialization", synchronic, Woolf's "tunneling process", temporal and spatial simultaneity

1. Introduction

The American literary scholar, Joseph Frank's notion of the "spatialization of form" ^[1] has resemblances with the Russian literary theoretician, Mikhail Bakhtin's construal of the 'chronotope' unraveled in his essay, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" ^[2] apropos the conceptualization of time-space in the genre of the novel. While Bakhtin presupposes an essential interdependency between temporal and spatial coordinates in a novel- the chronotope for him is a "formally constitutive category" ^[3] that is an index to "the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)" ^[4] Frank conceives predominantly of this mutual interdependency in terms of the inevitably crucial role that space plays in the determination of time in a novel.

2. Expostulation

The modernist novel is known to have reoriented time's necessarily progressive and forward movement of the novel and reorganized time as purely psychological in nature. Time in the modernist novel is rendered as an entirely abstract, immaterial, contiguous, non-physical and abstract phenomenon-as a felt experience by dint of discrete techniques.

Amidst these various experimental techniques, Frank looks particularly at descriptions of events, scenes and actions transpiring at a uniform and synchronic moment, reported from disparate angles and timed in such a way so as to give an impression of their materializing simultaneously. The event is recorded concomitantly from disparate angles within a tightly knit synchronic structure. As Frank says: "For the duration of the scene, at least, the time-flow of the narrative is halted:

attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the limited time-area" ^[5].

In fiction, the "syuzhet" (the narratorial order of telling of events) and the "fabula" (the actual order in which events concretize in the character's/s') life/lives) overlap conventionally. The underlying assumption for this is that all time is invariably teleological moving in a historically chronological sequence. Whereas, in modernist fiction, an author, while, by and large, depicting narrative incidents progressively; however, sometimes, attempts to compact time into a short span thus breaking time's indefatigably ceaseless flow. The narrative pauses in its linear depiction of events and overturns the traditional notion of the clock time's gradual flow describing a scene simultaneously from more than one character's eyes.

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) spans a single day and the narrative, often, shelves its consistent progression in order to record the characters' sense impressions anent any narratorial event reifying in space and time. This parses a protracted narratorial expansion on the same temporal moment and within the same spatial site. This becomes conspicuous, for instance, in a scene in the novel, when several characters are shown to descry a flying aeroplane fabricating figures in the sky with its blazing tail when the omniscient narrator interjects and echoes their disparate psychological ripostes to the event of the aeroplane skywriting.

This aerial skywriting scene from the novel may demonstrate Frank's insight:

"Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! Making letters in the sky! Everyone looked up.

¹ (Frank, Pg. 62)

² (Bakhtin)

³ (Bakhtin, Pg. 115)

⁴ (Bakhtin, Pg. 115)

⁵ (Frank, Pg. 62)

Dropping dead down, the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose, and.....out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters. But what letters? A C was it? An E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y perhaps?

'Glaxo,' said Mrs. Coates in a strained, awestricken voice, gazing straight up, and her baby, lying stiff and white in her arms, gazed straight up.

'Kreemo,' murmured Mrs. Bletchley, like a sleepwalker..... 'It's toffee,' murmured Mr. Bowley-and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it, and shutting off the smoke, away and away it rushed.....Then suddenly, as a train comes out of a tunnel, the aeroplane rushed out of the clouds again, the sound boring into the ears of all people in the Mall, in the Green Park in Regent Street, in Regent's Park, and the bar of smoke curved behind and it dropped down, and it soared up and wrote one letter after another- but what word was it writing?

Lucrezia Warren Smith, sitting by her husband's side on a seat in Regent's Park in the Broad Walk, looked up"^[6].

In this scene, Woolf shifts the focus from the mind of the narrator to the minds of the characters using what is referred famously to as Woolf's "tunneling process"^[7]. The structure of the novel covering a single day is important to the portrayal of this process. Time measured by clock moves ahead continuously but through "spatialization", there is created a physical locus/site where one encounters a pause in time so that not only is the concrete reality of the observable world supplanted with an intangible psychological reality but that intangible reality is visibilized by depicting the thought processes of several characters all at a time who are present at the same spatial location and reacting to the same phenomenon in a "limited time-area". The setting is established immediately in "the Mall, in the Green Park in Regent Street, in Regent's Park." The London streets and landmarks are spatial facts of the scene.

According to Susan Dick, "Literary realism in *Mrs Dalloway*": "Her design involves moving the characters through the streets of London while also timing their movements that will create the impression of disparate events occurring simultaneously.....This design is further complicated by the continual shifts from an omniscient perspective to one tied to a particular character, shifts that often take us from 'actual time' into 'mind time', two modes which are not, as our own experience tells us, measured on the same scale"^[8].

Furthermore, in this scene, the omniscient narrator links the protagonist, Clarissa to her doppelganger, Septimus Smith. Clarissa is shown standing at the corner of Book Street waiting to cross it. In front of her is an expansive view of the crowd at Buckingham Palace and she is hoping to catch a glimpse of the Queen while deciphering the messages of the sky-writing aeroplane. The official Queen's car arrives at the palace and the plane flies over Green Park, then over

Piccadilly, Regent Street and Regent's Park where Rezia and Septimus see it.

Woolf's careful description of the flight of the plane over London streets, like the journey of the official car, is a structural device enabling her to present multifarious scenes that are actualizing concomitantly. After moving steadily ahead in time, the narrative here pauses and the scene offers at a miniature level, something like an analogy of the larger narrative preoccupation in Mrs. Dalloway to interlock the lives of different characters untangling simultaneously. Here, the narrative interlocks the concomitant experiences of the same event of various characters and thus articulates what Frank terms as "spatialization of form" that expresses the alliance between temporal and spatial simultaneity in the narrative of a novel.

3. Conclusion

Discussions about the significance of time and space as concrete geo-temporal markers in the novel have been evident in literary criticism. The research article endeavors to exemplify Joseph Frank's conceptual instrument of "spatialization of form" through a detailed analysis of a scene in the modernist novel, Mrs. Dalloway. Frank's concept emphasizes how a modernist novelist by dint of artistic creativity can capture in the narrative a detailed description of a specific scene such that the description underscores and bears out the cardinal role that space plays in the temporal delineation of the scene. This occurs because the particular scene transpiring at a particular physical location and at a particular temporal moment is described concomitantly through discrete angles, perspectives or through the eyes of discrete characters etc. (or some other kindred technique deployed for the purpose) such that the readers can enormously realize the vitality of space as an important narrative agent in the depiction of the temporally synchronous scene. Frank opines: "For the duration of the scene, at least, the time-flow of the narrative is halted: attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the limited time-area"^[9]. The traditionally perpetual and continuous flow of a narrative is paused to the advantage of a meticulous description of a specific scene in the modernist narrative and Frank accentuates the overriding magnitude that "spatialization of form" as a narratorial technique plays within this authorial preoccupation to depict simultaneous perspectives of the same scene in a great minute detail.

4. References

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⁶ (Woolf, Pg. 16-18)

⁷ (Dick, Pg. 287)

⁸ (Dick, Pg. 288)

⁹ (Frank, Pg. 62)